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An Improv-able Legacy: Shining The Composition Spotlight on Viola Spolin's Improvisational Pedagogy

By

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DISSERTATION

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In
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ABSTRACT

AN IMPROV-ABLE LEGACY: SHINING THE

COMPOSITION SPOLIGHT ON VIOLA

SPOLIN'S IMPROVISATIONAL PEDAGOGY

by

Cory Chamberlain

University of New Hampshire, May 2021

This dissertation is an archival study of the works of Viola Spolin who is considered by many to be the founding mother of improvisational theater. During her life she published *Improvisation for the Theater* which is essential reading for anyone interested in doing improvisational theater as well as *Theater Games for The Classroom* where she adapted some of her techniques and games to an educational setting outside of theater. Along with these works, I was able to examine two of her unpublished works, a handbook on education and *What's Your Score?* as well as various notes, correspondences and interviews housed at Northwestern University's Charles Deering Memorial Library Special Collections. In so doing, I have composed a picture of Viola Spolin yet unseen. Using three essentials of theater games as theoretical pillars (Focus, Side Coaching, and Evaluation) as established by Spolin in *Theater Games for The Classroom,* I will argue that, like the work of Paulo Friere or bell hooks, Viola Spolin's improvisational pedagogy is worthy of reclamation for the field of composition. I argue this because I believe Spolin's work can create classrooms in which students experience the autonomy of discoveries that feel organic and relevant to their own lives through collaboration that builds on the unique individual identity of each student. Spolin's work gives us a different model of the teacher, that of Side Coach, that uses description rather than prescription to work with students in achieving these organic moments of discovery. Finally, I argue that looking to Improvisational methods of evaluation or assessment can help us become more fair to more

students by involving students in the goal setting process. Any one of these contributions would be enough to warrant inclusion in the pantheon of composition theorists we as a discipline use to guide our teaching and scholarship. All three together prove without any doubt that Spolin's work is worthy of reclamation for our classrooms.

1: IMPROVISING RHETORICALLY

This archival research project will be an examination of improvisational theater and its techniques in terms of how they may be utilized in rhetoric and composition pedagogy. Specifically, I will shine a spotlight on Viola Spolin, the foundational architect of improvisational theater, as an important figure in education whose theories have lasting implications on the discipline of rhetoric and compassion. To begin, I will show that rhetoric and composition and improvisational theater have always been linked and continue to be linked in contemporary composition scholarship thus legitimizing the techniques and theories of improvisational theater and reconnecting these terms to their roots in rhetorical theory to form an improvisational based pedagogy for the composition classroom. Then, I'll trace out Spolin's own pedagogical thoughts by carefully examining her notes, and both published and unpublished works to establish the basis for a composition pedagogy based in improvisation. I'll utilize this improvisational composition pedagogy to directly answer the call of those seeking alternatives to traditional, assessment pedagogies and offer alternative methods of conceptualizing learning in the composition classroom that emphasize the importance of individual identities and the roles the play in classroom communities.

As composition teachers so many of the things we do in the classroom are acts of improvisation. So often we come to class with a scripted lesson plan that we feel we need to get through in order to have taught our students, but just as often we adapt our lesson plans to the moment. Of course, I understand that in moments of uncertainty (and we all know these are inevitable in the classroom) a traditionally structured lesson plan helps keep us on topic to ensure students get the information we want to teach them. There is nothing wrong with wanting to set yourself up to best teach students, but why not look to improvisational theater, a genre of theater born of and dedicated to learning from uncertainty, to supplement our pedagogical repertoires? The

good news for composition teachers is we already have some basic improvisational skills to build on. We change gears when a student asks a poignant question or shares a powerful experience. Improvisation and rhetoric and composition have always been linked. We adapt and react in the moment to 20 or more different students at a time and in turn (ideally) those students adapt and react to us.

Improvisation has even deeper roots in composition than just the improvisational thinking of teacher in their classes though. In *Institutes of Oratory* book 10.7.1 Quintilian writes "But the richest fruit of all of our study, and the most ample recompense for the extent of our labor, is the faculty of speaking extempore, and he who has not succeeded in acquiring it will do well, in my opinion, to renounce the occupations of the forum and devote his solitary talent of writing to some other employment" (568). Quintilian held the ability to improv in such high regard he basically tells any speaker that does not possess this ability to give up speaking! He goes on in book 10.7.2 "There arise indeed innumerable occasions where it is absolutely necessary to speak on the instant…" and in book 10.7.3 he says "just as the pilot has to alter his course according to the direction of the winds, so must our plan be varied to suit the variation of the cause" (568). To Quintilian one of the greatest resources any orator (and let us not forget, to Quintilian, the orator is a good man speaking well, so also any citizen) can possess is the ability to seize the kariotic moment through improvisation rather than simply repeat memorized knowledge.

The term Kairos itself is also a key indicator of just how foundational improvisation is to the field of rhetoric and composition. According to Phillip Sipora and James Baumlin's comprehensive collection *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis* the meaning of Kairos has changed over time (appropriately) to a range of different but similar definitions such as: timing, right timing, symmetry, propriety, occasion, due measure, fitness, tact, decorum, convenience, proportion, fruit,

profit, wise moderation, vital or lethal place on the body (Sipora, 1-2). A clear common denominator between all of these definitions and improvisation is an attention to/understanding of context at the specific moment in time. Building off of Eric Charles White's work in his book *Kairomania* Sipora makes this link explicit claiming:

> "Since each discourse must be shaped in immediate response to the present occasion, instruction in Kairos becomes virtually impossible. While theory, grounded in successful past discourse, provides models of right and wrong strategies rhetorical theory cannot cast its net over the unforeseen, unpredictable, and uncontrollable moments. In a sense, then, every rhetorical act becomes a reinvention of theory as well as of the discourse itself. Another way of describing the shaping influence of the ever-emerging present occasion is to treat effective, kairic discourse as a mode of "improvisation." (7)

While I essentially agree with this quote that all rhetorical acts are improvised and kairotic and in that improvisation discovery is born, I do take a bit of issue with Sipora's claim that instruction in Kairos is virtually impossible. If kairic discourse is a mode for improvisation wouldn't the opposite side of that coin also hold true? Wouldn't improvisation also be a mode through which we treat kairic discourse? I believe it is and as such teaching the tools and techniques of improvisational theater provide a template through which to teach the "richest fruit of all of our study," improvisation or Kairos. If as Sipora claims "every rhetorical act becomes a reinvention of theory as well as of the discourse itself" then every moment of improvisation (every kairotic moment) is a moment of learning. So, improvisation provides all of the tools necessary for learning and, crucially, improvisation and composition have roots that go much further back than this dissertation.

Building off of the longstanding links between improvisation and rhetoric and composition, this study will establish the tools of improvisational theater as established by Viola Spolin as tools

for use in the composition classroom with the intent on forging more cohesive and productive classroom communities in which learners and teachers alike value the creation of knowledge and group discovery as the focal point of the classroom. To make this case, I will perform archival research at Northwestern University's Charles Deering Library Special Collection in which I will demonstrate what an the improvisational theater pedagogy of Viola Spolin provides for use in the field of composition.

Literature Review

Though composition has wavered in its embrace of improvisation, other academic disciplines have not. Even looking to composition related fields such as the field of creative writing can provide examples of this. In his 2004 paper *Creative Teaching: Collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation* Keith Sawyer argues "Conceiving of teaching as improvisation emphasizes the interactional and responsive creativity of a teacher working together with a unique group of students in particular, effective classroom discussion is improvisational, because the flow of the class is unpredictable and emerges from the actions of all participants, both teachers and students" (13). Sawyer is writing about teaching in creative writing, but as composition teachers we are teaching our students to become creative problem solvers and critical thinkers on the page, so I see no reason not to share ideas with creative writers. No doubt both composition teachers and creative writing teachers have both experienced moments of unpredictability and uncertainty in which we feel out of control in our own classrooms. Oftentimes student responses (or my own responses to these responses) take our discussion in an unexpected direction, but rather than avoid these moments, we should welcome them. This is our students giving us access into their thought processes and worldviews. This is students taking what we are telling them and building upon it with their own perspectives. This is the organic creation of new knowledge. This is improvisation as education.

This notion of creation of knowledge through embracing the unexpected cannot simply be thrust on our students though. In her 2000 article *The Necessity of Uncertainty: A Case Study of Language Arts Reform* Susan Kidd Villaume follows several elementary school teachers through a curricular reform to monitor how they react to the uncertainty that accompanies the shift from the old curriculum to the new. Though she is looking at elementary school teachers integrating new practices into their classrooms, the results have at least some bearing here as we are both talking about teachers' ability to adapt. She found "that the real challenge of language arts reform is figuring out how to create learning environments that aggressively nurture ongoing questioning, study, reflection, and exploration for all teachers" (23). As I hope to show, all of these behaviors are inherent to improvisational theater. If we want to change the way we think about the classroom and open up a new space where learning takes center stage, then we need to become more comfortable with uncertainty ourselves. We must use embrace a stance of "aggressive nurturing" through improvisation. I believe that it is precisely such a stance that is necessary to help students be more comfortable with uncertainty which is a key trait in the improvisational performer and thus turning to improvisation will provide us in the composition classroom with the tools to do so.

Fear of these unexpected, improvisational moments where our control feels like it is slipping away or lost completely is understandable. In Mark C. Taylor's *The Moment of Complexity* he theorizes that exchange of information through more and more complex networks leads to an overflow of chaotic information which he terms "noise" (101). I'm sure we've all felt the wheels slipping off a bit in class and rushed back to the safety of a carefully crafted lesson plan in order to escape the noise and chaos of moments we feel uncertain in. However, while this chaotic spread of information can be daunting and can certainly lead one to feel a loss of control, Taylor tells us "When we read or hear what we expect or already know, little or no news is conveyed. Information involves what is unexpected and, thus, is related to improbability" (109). So, we should welcome these moments of

uncertainty when our class feels like we might be losing control of it and embrace them as moments in which we can blend our pedagogical goals with our students' desires both inside the wall of the classroom and out. We can take the information we have and through the network of the classroom we can combine it with that of our students and while we may not know the exact result, there is at least the possibility that we will discover something new.

Embracing fear and uncertainty in order to create something new as a group isn't just something we seek to do in the composition classroom. Improvisers attempt this every time they step on stage together. Speaking of her mentor Del Close in her book *Art by Committee* Charna Halpern writes of improvisational theater "Del always said to follow the fear in your work. It is good to be uncomfortable; otherwise there is no danger, no excitement, no growth" (45). Just as Taylor says, Halpern shows us that fear and uncertainty often lead the improvisational actor to a place of growth and discovery. The community emphasis in improvisational theater is what really draws me to its potential in the classroom though. As Halpern, Close, and Kim Johnson write in *Truth in Comedy* "When a team of improvisers pays close attention to each other, hearing and remembering everything, and respecting all that they hear, a group mind forms. The goal of this phenomenon is to connect the information created out of group ideas – and its easily capable of brilliance" (92). Not only can improvisation provide students and teachers with a way of making uncertainty into discovery, but its group focus makes it an ideal tool for application in the composition classroom where discussions are often part of the way we teach. But there would be no Close or Halpern without Viola Spolin.

Spolin was an innovator in American improvisational theater and she used improvisational techniques for teaching young actors, for mental health, and to promote better communication in all kinds of settings from individual classrooms to a global stage. Spolin published two key works, the

first being *Improvisation for the Theatre* in which she broke down her improvisational ideas into games that facilitated an improvisation-based approach to learning acting. Spolin worked with sociologist Neva Boyd from 1924-1927 and discovered the deep history of games as a tool for learning and self-discovery through personal experience (Spolin, xivvi). She eventually realized her teaching techniques could work for all kinds of students and published *Theater Games for the Classroom* in order to utilize the potential for learning that is inherent to the improvisational mindset in the classroom itself. Though she went on to teach at several universities including Brandeis, her work began in Chicago where her archive is now housed at Northwestern University. I have examined this archive in order to gain insight into just how Spolin envisions the Praxis between improvisation and education working so that we might utilize this approach in the composition classroom. Though she has published works that detail how to adapt her methods to the classroom, I will dive deeply into her notes and unpublished works in order to paint the most accurate picture possible of what I believe would be a Spolin approved improvisational pedagogy.

Having researched Spolin's notes and unpublished work along with her most famous publications, I suggest that we as composition teachers throw out our scripts and build on the improvisational tools that have always been rooted in rhetoric and composition to mirror for our students the potential for discovery in the uncertain. I believe that an improvisational mindset allows students and teachers to embrace moments of uncertainty and reframe them as moments of potential discovery. An improvisational mindset also facilitates more cohesive classroom communities in which students share experiences and come to respect each other as nuanced, complex individuals each uniquely capable of utilizing the skills they bring to the classroom to unlock the potential for discovery in the uncertain. Instead of turning to answers that have come before, I want to facilitate (or side coach to borrow a term from improvisational theater.) my students as they uncover the potential in their own experiences to discover more about their worlds

in order to create organic, lasting moments of discovery in the classroom that extend beyond its walls.

No Laughing Matter

To be clear, when I use the term improvisation, I don't mean improvisational comedy though I do think the letting go of the ego and surrendering to discovery and curiosity inherit in improv often results in comedy for both performers and audience. Improvisation is much more than simply being funny in the moment. Spolin gives it a complicated definition that I think is worth examining in its entirety here:

> Playing the game; setting out to solve a problem with no preconception as to how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem; it is not the scene, it is the way to the scene, a predominate function of the intuitive, playing the game brings the opportunity to learn theater to a cross-section of people, "playing it by ear"; process as opposed to result; not ad-lib or "originality" or "making it up by yourself"; a form. If understood, possible to any age group; setting object in motion between players in a game; solving of problems together; the ability to allow the acting problem to evolve the scene; a moment in the lives of people without needing a plot or story line for the communication; an art form; transformation, brings forth details and relationships as organic whole; living process. (361).

It is clear that Spolin did not view improvisation as way to come up with jokes, but that she felt the process of improv, especially when done with a group of individuals, was capable of solving the most complex problems organically but utilizing what each individual brings to that group for the whole.

Some of the originators of improvisational theater did entire shows in which there was no humor at all though. Therefore, though improvisation is often associated with comedy, it is not always about being funny. In fact, the best improvisation does not involve any formal joke writing as something even as simple a scripted joke can disrupt the flow of spontaneity. As Spolin says in her landmark *Improvisation for the Theatre* "Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression" (4). So, the most important part of improvisation is not making a joke or being funny, but rather being committed to the reality in the moment and exploring it to discover what that experience means. As Spolin herself said "Process is the goal and the goal is endless process" (Lurie). To Spolin, the goal of improvisation was endless discovery and exploration and not simply comedy.

Though Spolin was certainly the most influential improviser and teacher, the aforementioned Del Close and Chara Halpern picked up the baton she presented and ran with it. Whereas Spolin often connects her games and exercises to education explicitly, their work focuses more exclusively on the improvisational performer, so I'll use it to demonstrate traits I find crucial to an improvisational mindset. In Halpern's *Art by Committee: A Guide to Advanced Improvisation* she credits Close and others with pioneering modern improvisational techniques. Halpern writes: "The rules that make improvisation so successful today were created by Del Close and some of our great improvisational pioneers in Elaine May's kitchen one night after a performance at the Compass Theater" (49). The performance in question hadn't been very good and upon reflective conversation "They all agreed they had to stop arguing to get the scenes to forward. The "Yes and" theory was born" (49). After a dialogue in which Close and others reflected on their previous actions, the group was able to come up with new rules that moved them forward from a lackluster performance in a

productive way. Even the way in which the modern theories of improvisational theater were developed had Frierian echoes as I'll explain in the next section. Halpern lists these rules developed by Close (though she prefers to think of them as tools) as agreement, throw out the first thought, and support (49-52). These tools are just some of the evidence that we should embrace the improvisational mindset for both students and teachers in composition. In doing so, we can access a pedagogy in which neither student nor teacher is the center of the class and instead discovery (in the form of critical thinking and learning) becomes the center of the classroom. The lens of performance is not a new one to look at teaching through and before I attempt to trace out a direction moving forward, I'll briefly examine that history.

The Old Models

If we can place knowledge creation at the center of the classroom, we can help create an environment in which students learn by appropriating what we do in the classroom into their lives outside of it. In the teacher-centered model, there is no room for the students' own input. Knowledge is not built here, but rather passed down so that it cannot change, but only be reinforced. Moments of improvisation in the classroom are stamped out in favor of moments of pre-planned learning. The lesson is already known. Nothing new can come of it. This is essentially Paulo Friere's infamous concept of the "banking model' of education in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider know nothing" (72). So, instead of thinking critically at the time when we would most like them too (when their immediate world-view is threatened), our students simply appropriate what they think we want (or what they have already been told) because to them we are the keeper of knowledge while they are merely its passive recipient. For Friere, learning takes place in "action and reflection" which he calls Praxis (87). This is just like in improvisation. Friere proposes we use dialogue with others to

create the world through our mutual actions and reflections (88-89). I want my students to be autonomous agents in the creation of knowledge just as Friere does, not to simply be appropriated by what has come before. This is what I mean in the previous section by Frierian echoes. Close and his players acted (quite literally in this example) and after their action the reflected and conversed about their action in order to reflect upon it. Working together the group was able to create new rules just as Friere tells us action and reflection create the worlds around us. Just like actors in an improvisational performance, both students and teachers must dialogue with each other utilizing action and reflection in order to build knowledge together. Improvisation provides a ready-made conduit through which that Praxis takes place.

Jane Thompkins' landmark 1990 essay *Pedagogy of the Distressed* represents a call to action to abandon what she calls the "teacher performance model" (654) in favor of a more supportive approach she refers to as a "maternal or coaching" model (660). The "teacher performance model" in which teachers perform the role of teacher to as Thompkins says "a) to show the students how smart I was, b) to show them how knowledgeable I was, and to show them how well-prepared I was for class" (654). While the students' own ideas are considered in the "teacher performance" model, their goals and learning objectives are still only secondary to the knowledge which the teacher holds above all. Thompkins' goals, much like my own, were to move away from a "banking" model of education and towards something more conversational, more democratic, something more like Friere's notion of Praxis. Shady Cosgrove also points to weaknesses in the teacher performance model in his 2005 article *Teaching and Learning as Improvisational Performance in the Creative Writing Classroom* writing "The idea of performance, where the teacher is the performer, fails to take into account the active engagement of students… How often are audience members being encouraged to critically engage with the material being presented *during* the performance" (472). Thompkins, Cosgrove, and many others call for a move to the "maternal or coaching model" of teaching which

gives students more responsibility to take an active role in their own learning. Thompkins' call was also inspired Freire's now classic work.

Like these theorists before me, I am seeking a model for the classroom which allows students to take an active role in learning. Viola Spolin's improvisational education model provides the type of pedagogy in which autonomy and active learning take center stage which we in the composition world would know as "student-centered pedagogy." In terms of the writing classroom, student-centered pedagogies "will not derive from a generalized model of composing, or be based on where the student ought to be because she is a freshman or sophomore, but will begin from where the student is, and move where the student moves…" (North, 439). So, if we are to be student-centered teachers, then we meet the students where they are at and move forward with them in their education when they are ready to move forward. It is in utilizing the tools already present in improvisation that I believe we can do better at being student-centered in our pedagogies.

Student-centered pedagogies have certainly been shown to be empirically effective in increasing student self-efficacy in the composition classroom (Jones, 233-34). So, the movement toward student centered pedagogies seems like an obvious fix to the problem of teacher as performer of knowledge. However, Donna Kain complicates the student-centered model in her 2003 article *Teacher-Centered versus Student-Centered: Balancing Constraint and Theory in the Composition Classroom* in which she claims that often the merger of theory and reality we find in the classroom collapses the binary of student centered versus teacher centered pedagogies. She claims, "When we fail adequately to consider misalignments between our student's expectations and preparation and our own training, student-centered approaches can be no more effective than the teacher-centered approaches they are meant to replace" (106). Kain argues that reflection on and understanding of the theory that informs our practices in the classroom can help us find a solution. We have a

breakdown in communication here. Though we want to meet students where they are and proceed forward with them, our lack of training in how to do so can lead us back to a top-down approach in the classroom. Improvisation is just the tool we need to meet students where they are and move forward together.

Therefore, the praxis I will examine more deeply in this project is that of improvisation and composition and rhetoric. Clearly, the two have deeps roots and contemporary uses in other educational spaces. This work will prove improvisation is the conduit through which we access the space in-between practice and theory where students can use their experiences to come together and create new knowledge. Improvisation allows for students to act and reflect not only on their own ideas but with the ideas and perspectives of others which, ultimately, is how we all learn.

Praxis Makes Perfect

Looking back to Sawyer's work, he talks about a basic set of principles he sees as useful in the classroom from improvisation with the "Yes, and…" rule first and foremost as it allows conversation (and learning) to build upon itself. He also points to the guidelines "avoid playwriting" and "staying in the moment" as key to classroom dynamics. A student that is "playwriting" tries to think a couple of responses ahead and guess where the conversation will go. This leads to students not being "in the moment" and instead of talking to each other about learning, students will simply be parroting back response to see who can please the teacher more (18). To me, Sawyer is making the same call here for students that Spolin, Halpern, and Close make when telling improvisational actors about agreement (Yes, and…) and throwing out the first thought (avoiding playwriting and staying in the moment).

When Cosgrove offers up three components of the successful creative writing workshop we can see how one might create Praxis between these two worlds (improvisation and education) in the

composition classroom. The three components Cosgrove lists are: "an understood structure for the participants to engage within, common language, and participation" (475). Utilizing the tenets of improvisation as a structure governing classroom dynamics would allow students to share common language (both the terms used in class and the tools of improvisation) and facilitate and encourage participation. It would be a mistake to think of improvisation as completely unstructured. Halpern quotes Close in *Art by Committee* as saying:

> I really hate it when I run into someone who says 'Well, you can't think as well as a group as you can as an individual. Art is an individual undertaking, so you might as well not even try.' No! Art is possible by committee. Basically all you need is some structure, traffic patterns, game rules, and some kind of image of what it is you want to do. (8).

Though Cosgrove is talking specifically about the creative writing workshop and Close is talking about the stage, this certainly applies to the composition classroom as both sites feature writers creating together. Of course, we can still enter the classroom with structure and goals in mind. However, we can have more productive classroom communities if we can think of what we do in the classroom as a much more group-oriented affair and adapt and take risks (so our students can appropriate adaptability and embrace uncertainty instead of simply banking away static knowledge) based on the needs and experiences of that community.

Northwestern Archival Research

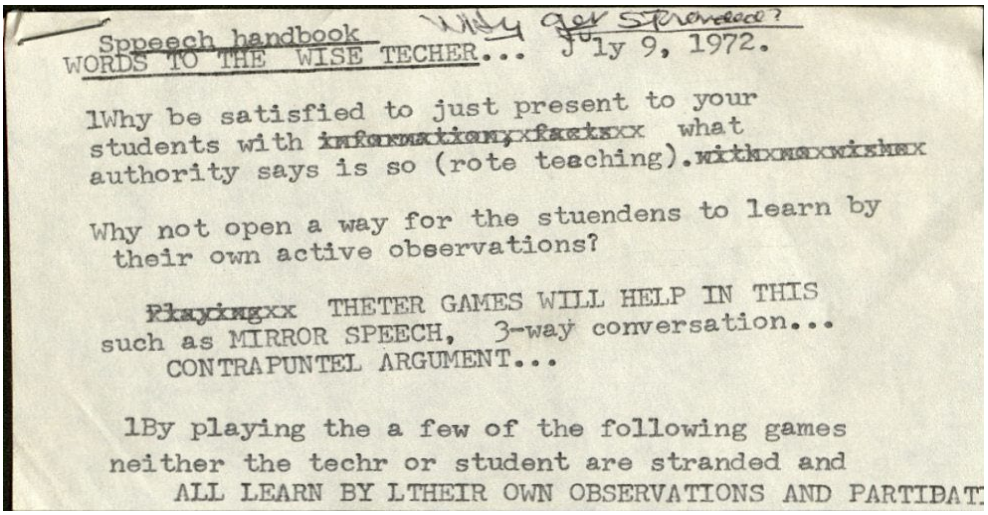
The guiding methodology I used for this archival study was largely improvisational in that I adapted my research to the materials I had at my disposal and the time period I had to examine them. Though a bit intimidating, I was surprised to find precedence for this kind of approach in what little literature there is about archival research recommended an open approach. In Barbara E.

L'Eplattenier's "An Argument for Archival Research Methods: Thinking Beyond Methodology" she notes that "archival historical work is often so unique - each archive, each situation, each study is different, with different resources, different access, different constraints- generalizing about archival work can be difficult" (68). In her article, L'Eplattenier reviews what existing literature there is about archival methods in rhetoric and composition. The key finding I took from L'Eplattenier was that while establishing general methods for this type of study is difficult, a good methods section is crucial because it "will give readers a sense of what was examined, how it was examined, and where it is currently located. A good methods section, however we construct it, offers us details regarding the circumstances of the research and pulls back the curtain on work done" (71-2). In the following paragraphs I will do just as L'Eplattenier states and try to show the "man behind the curtain" as much as possible.

During the month of June 2019, I spent a week in the archives at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois which contains teaching materials, writings, and journal entries from Viola Spolin. I had planned a return in 2020 but the Covid-19 Pandemic made it so that was not possible. However, thanks to the great people working in the archives at Northwestern, I was able to obtain scans of some boxes I did not get to examine on my first visit. As Robert Connors writes "What historians really do in the Archive – and really need to do – is play. Search is play" (227). I carried this idea of play and improvisation with me into the archives at Northwestern. Praxis is a crucial element to my pedagogical approach both in and out of the classroom and so embracing the notion of play as learning is not just something I want to thrust upon my students, but a notion I embody in all of the work I approach. I did not know what I was looking for when I arrived; I only knew that I had a kindred spirit in Spolin and that perhaps she would help add a theoretical backbone to the work I wanted to do. I contacted the archivist at Northwestern and we exchanged some emails where I indicated a few boxes I'd like to look at based on the search tool the university provided. I

had not anticipated what I would eventually find would be so relevant to my own project. But that is the promise of play: there will always be the potential for discovery.

Spolin's archive contained many interesting notes on improvisation and education and I eventually ended up looking through almost all the boxes and taking a very generous amount of pictures and pdfs back with me as there was just too much to look at in one week. I kept a notebook in which I created spreadsheets of each box and folder and a short description of what was contained in them. I also took notes on how I envisioned using each piece of material that I anticipated I may find use in. Spolin's letters, notes and interviews were illuminating and many excerpts from them make up the quotes used in this project. What I had never anticipated is just how kindred of a spirit Spolin was. She suffered a stroke towards the end of her life that greatly hampered her ability to teach and write but for years up until this point she had been working on a manuscript simple titled *Education* and even before that she had tried unsuccessfully to publish her manual on evaluation *What's Your Score?* Both of these titles play a pivotal role in my dissertation. The scattered excerpts of *Education* especially those from the section "Words to the Wise Teacher" explain Spolin's educational ideas in a more robust way than she does in any of her published work. The much more complete *What's Your Score* serves as the basis for the fourth chapter of this work on assessment.


Spppeech handbook Why get stressed?
WORDS TO THE WISE TECHER... July 9, 1972.

1Why be satisfied to just present to your
students with ~~information, facts~~ what
authority says is so (rote teaching). ~~with~~

Why not open a way for the stuendens to learn by
their own active obeservations?

~~Playing~~ THETER GAMES WILL HELP IN THIS
such as MIRROR SPEECH, 3-way conversation...
CONTRAPUNTEL ARGUMENT...

1By playing the a few of the following games
neither the techr or student are stranded and
ALL LEARN BY LTHEIR OWN OBSERVATIONS AND PARTIBAT

An example of Spolin's "Words to the Wise Teacher" illustrating her conflation of authority with rote teaching. (Spolin, *Words*)

In this study, I make heavy use of Spolin's major published works but I constantly utilize Spolin's unpublished texts and archival notes to further explicate her ideas and their importance to composition education. Spolin's *Theater Games for the Classroom* provides the links that help me forge an obvious link between Spolin's own work and education. This work informs both my second and third chapters in which I use it to foreground an improvisational approach for both teachers and students.

Her most well-known work, *Improvisation for the Theater* provides theoretical background from an improvisational theater standpoint to every chapter in this work and though it is perhaps less readily relevant to the composition classroom than *Theater Games for the Classroom*, I return to it often to demonstrate how many of Spolin's ideas can translate seamlessly into the composition classroom. Her posthumously published *Theater Games for The Lone Actor* is used here in chapter 4 to help demonstrate Spolin's thoughts on assessment, though her unpublished *What's Your Score* goes into much more detail and as such is utilized a bit more heavily.

Playbill

This dissertation will argue that the techniques of improvisational theater as pioneered by Viola Spolin have a valuable role to play in the composition classroom. Improvisation has the power to take students from being passive knowledge recipients uncomfortable with uncertainty to active seekers and players that embrace uncertainty for its potential discovery. Improvisation also gives teachers a new lens through which to view teaching, that of the side coach. Viewing teaching as a side coach, teachers can create courses and individual lessons that meet students where they are and help them to learn what is most relevant to their lives and careers. Improvisation also provides a new framework for assessment allowing student labor and experience to take center stage over authoritarian reification of what has come before.

Following Viola Spolin's own dichotomy of educational improvisation in *Theater for the Classroom*, I have divided this work into three sections. She claims that focus, side coaching, and evaluation are "essential parts of any theater game" (5). The first section of my work will examine the role of the focus in each game to show that focus opens students up to embrace the uncertainty of the classroom and real-world interaction to discover knowledge. The second section will introduce the teacher of improvisation, the side coach, in order to show that the side coach model uniquely positions teachers to help students build of off their experiences outside of the classroom to inform how and what they learn in it. The third section on evaluation builds on the work of Spolin and composition scholars to claim that improvisational assessment is a crucial tool for teachers trying to build courses with the most fair assessment practices for all students. Together, these sections prove without a doubt that Viola Spolin's work utilizing improvisational techniques for education is important work for all educators to familiarize themselves with. The final chapter of this work takes many of the pieces I wanted to share but could not find a place for in the other

sections to do the inverse of the introduction. In the intro I have linked improvisation and composition and in the final chapter I fold that link back on itself to establish Spolin's interest in pedagogy extended far beyond the theater. Writing links thought with action just as improvisation does and so Spolin's work is especially important for us in the field of composition education. For all of these reasons it is (and has been) time that we recognize Viola Spolin as an educator and pioneer with many invaluable improvisational tools for the field of composition.

2: THE PEDAGOGICAL NARRATIVE OF VIOLA SPOLIN

Viola Spolin is widely renowned in acting and theatre disciplines as the founder of American improvisational theater though she herself would not accept this moniker. Instead of thinking herself the inventor of improvisational theater, Spolin claimed in a letter written in 1975 as a response to an article claiming she had invented improvisational theater that her invention was really "an organic body of problem solving exercises for training in theater conventions" which she acknowledged could be "absorbed by many schools and groups" (Spolin, *Janet Coleman Letter*). She would go on to share her improvisational pedagogy with students, prisoners, the mentally ill, foreign dignitaries and more. But beyond that Viola Spolin is a captivating figure. She was a woman years (possibly decades) ahead of her time and she truly embodied the spirit of improvisation. As a child she would wear red lipstick and overalls to school and her family called her "Spark" (Sills). Spolin was always one of a kind. As an adult, she created one of a pedagogy of improvisation that has the power within its methods to free the creative minds of those that employ those methods. In this chapter, I will detail Spolin's history chronologically, but beyond simply just giving dates and places, I will examine what experiences and figures that shaped her pedagogy in and out of classrooms.

Broadly speaking, Spolin saw the need to remove as much authority as possible from the student and allow them the freedom to play with different character choices and actions so that the student could bring their own unique perspective into each acting experience. More specifically, Spolin was seeking to achieve the goals of the famous Constatin Stanislavski (in her notes Spolin spells his name with a C so I have retained that spelling here), by adding improvisation to his method approach so I'll give a bit of background on Stanislavski and his method here.

Stanislavski is a monumental figure in acting having pioneered the famous (even outside of acting circles) Stanislavski Method also known as the "method" approach to acting. In 1897

Stanislavski built on existing theories of acting to create "a conscious codification of ideas about acting which have always been the property of most good actors of all countries…" (qtd in Norvelle, 30). According to Lee Norvelle in "Stanislavski Revisited", Stanislavski's system consisted of several points which all actors needed to follow to create "favorable conditions" for inspiration come to an actor. These points were later developed into a forty-point system by Stanislavski which worked to promote an actor's ability to utilize both the "internals and externals" of their performance. Though this may all sound overly controlling and overbearing, Stanislavski was merely seeking to help both actors and teachers of acting as he noticed that "Teachers of acting have nothing on which to base their teaching, since 'inspiration' on which the theoreticians of the stage put so much stress cannot be taught, nor can it be expected to materialize itself just when the actor needs it" (qtd in Norvelle, 33). Stanislavski boils it all down in 1924 when speaking to a group of actors telling them:

> Remember that my objective is to teach you the hard work of an actor and director of plays - it is not to provide you with a pleasant pastime on the stage. There are other theaters, teachers and methods for that. The work of an actor and a director, as we understand it here, is a painful process, not merely some abstract 'joy of creativeness' that one hears so much empty talk about from the ignoramuses in art... The whole process of an actor's and a director's work--including his performance-- is one that requires enormous self mastery and often also great physical endurance... (qtd in Norvelle, 36).

This leads me to believe his goals and Spolin's are not so dissimilar. In the introduction to *Improvisation for the Theater* she is quoted as saying "My vision is of a world of accessible intuition" (xi). So, it would seem both Spolin and Stanislavski wanted to help their students access the part of themselves that is wholly unique to them as an individual. Spolin's own methods were very likely an attempt to build upon Stanislavski's method.

Method Man

According to Jean Benedetti's *Stanislavski: An Introduction*, Stanislavski wanted to open actors up to authentic creative experience and felt there must be a method through which this could be achieved. As Benedetti writes "If this state comes naturally to the great actors then it must lie within every actor's nature to achieve it in some measure" (44). Much like Spolin, Stanislavski was trying to allow his actors to use experience as the pathway to authentic discovery. To arrive there Stanislavski studied other great actors and noted that they all shared one thing: belief. As Stanislavski himself said:

> I realized that actors begin to create the instant the magic, creative 'if' springs into their minds and their imagination. As long as there is nothing but the real world, real truth, which of course, we have to believe in, the creative process has not begun. But then the creative 'if' appears, i.e., an imagined truth in which the actor can believe as sincerely as he does in real truth, only with greater urgency. It is just like a child believing in a doll, its inner life and circumstance. As soon as the magic 'if' appears, the actor moves out of real life into an imginary life he has himself invented. (qtd in Benedetti, 49).

Just as Spolin's "Yes and…" keeps actors playing and games moving toward their focus, Stanislavski's belief and the magic "if" allows actors to build together and discover new things on stage rather than be forced to imitate what has come before. To achieve this creative mindset Stanislavski first proposed these six steps which evolved into his famous method approach:

> In the first preparatory process of the 'will' the actor prepares himself for future creation. He gets to know the author's work, he becomes enthusiastic or makes himself enthusiastic about it and so arouses his creative gifts, i.e. stimulates the desire to create; In the second process, 'searching', he looks within himself and outside himself for the psychological material

> needed for creation; In the third process, 'experience', the actor creates invisibly, for himself. He creates in his dreams the inner and outer image of the character he is to portray … he must adapt himself to this alien life and feel it as though it were his own …, In the fourth process, 'physicalizing', the actor creates visibly, for himself ; In the fifth process, 'synthesis', the actor must bring together to a point of total synthesis the process of 'experience' and the process of 'physicalization'. These two processes must proceed simultaneously, start together, help and develop each other; The sixth process is that of the effect on the audience. (qtd in Benedetti, 54-55).

Crucially, Stanislavski kept refining his system throughout his lifetime with the goal of answering one question: "If [the creative state] cannot be mastered all at once, can it not be achieved bit by bit, that is to say, by constructing the whole from its parts?" (qtd in Benedetti, 44) Here, we see another key similarity in Spolin and Stanislavski: value of the process over the product. As Benedetti notes "Acting was no longer thought of as *imitation* but as *process*. It was no longer a question of purely external control, of technique, of skillfully reproducing a facsimile of experience but of creating and conveying inner life, a sense of being, fresh each time" (45). The journey was more important than the destination in Stanislavski's method and the same is true of Spolin's improvisational methods.

While Stanislavski's method was becoming more well known in the mid 1920's, a young Viola Spolin was just beginning to study social work at Northwestern University. It was here that the foundation would be put down for Spolin's future work in Improvisation. Though she only spent three years studying at Northwestern, it was there that she would meet the teacher that would reshape her ideas and eventually lead to her life work utilizing play and games in education. According to Aretha Sills, Spolin's most influential teacher at Northwestern (and likely of all time) was social group work theorist Neva Boyd. Spolin would go on to say of Boyd "The effects of her

inspiration never left me for a single day" (Sills). Boyd had been studying the roles of play and games in society particularly how games served as an educational tool. After working with Boyd, Spolin modified games and created her own for use as teaching tools. I believe it was the shared ideology of Boyd and Spolin that made this collaboration so fruitful for Spolin, so I'll briefly examine Boyd's background and motivation in utilizing play for learning.

Spolin Finds a Mentor

When Spolin and Boyd met in 1923, Boyd had been teaching group work (what we now call social work) at Jane Addams' Hull House which at the time was known as The Recreation Training School (Simon). Boyd and those studying at Hull House were progressive educators and socially. Hull House was a safe space for gay women even in the 1920's. Boyd's progressive views on social work were greatly influenced by games and traditional folk tales from many cultures. Her classes were initially open to anyone with a basic high school education but later required two years of college as entry became more competitive. For Boyd the individual developed through group life so games were a natural way to reproduce the kinds of group interactions that would organically teach students. Simply put, games served to educate an individual about their community and how to be a part of it. As Boyd herself writes in *Play as a Means of Social Adjustment:*

> Just as mathematics is a way, or manner of thinking, so play is a way of social behaving. Thus when games, used as educational nutriment, are well correlated with the growth and development of the players, they induce normal patterns of social behavior, characteristic of no other activity. Moreover, the players abstract, or learn each according to his own growth and development, and much of this "learning" is on the unverbalizable level. (410)

Spolin Boyd collaborated on utilizing games in education until Spolin's son Paul Sills was born in 1927. Spolin did not rest though. In the early 1930's she majored in Dramatics at Depaul's night

school after which she started teaching local children of immigrants and children with mental difficulties. During this time she would play games with friends at her apartment and Paul would watch propped up on the bed. Spolin recalls these times fondly and has been known to credit Paul's experiences watching Spolin and friends play games with his later creation of The Second City.

In the late 1930's Boyd and Spolin reconnected when Boyd recommended Spolin to the Works Progress Administration to be a drama supervisor. Spolin rented space at Hull house and there are stories of her at this time going out into the streets to round up actors. These performances are some of the first recorded times that audience suggestion played a role in performance. In this role, she put on an event with hundreds of local people joining in where everyone improvised a train that went to all the different communities in Chicago at the time. Spolin clearly saw the value of games to educate communities and the individuals within them and used her role in the WPA to promote this value to her surrounding community (Sills). Her inspiration to do so is easy to trace back to Boyd but Spolin was using theater as the vehicle through which to push those ideas and seemed to have found (no pun intended) a wider audience.

By the 1940's Spolin had moved out to Hollywood and formed a children's repertory theater there. Here, many of her own ideas for improvisation began to take stage as she would adapted Boyd's games to solve problems she was having with actors. According to Allan Lurie who was writing a biographical article on Spolin she "devised a body of problem-solving games and exercises the very playing of which would organically make some particular theater technique or convention part of the children's natures" (Lurie 2). Crucially, Spolin eschewed authority in these games "'How to do it' lectures and rewards or punishments were unnecessary to this approach" according to Lurie's observations. This idea of using the games to subvert authoritarian practices in education came straight from Boyd. As Boyd wrote in *Handbook of Recreational Games:*

> Games are the organized accumulation of play-behavior, and since play-behavior is centered largely in the thalamic region of the nervous system, and is therefore closely related to the outside world, every player has access to the stimulation of the dynamic process, and of necessity gets values out of his own experience. Because this is true, any attempts to set up values as goals for the players would tend to defeat the possibility of their experiencing these values spontaneously. (6)

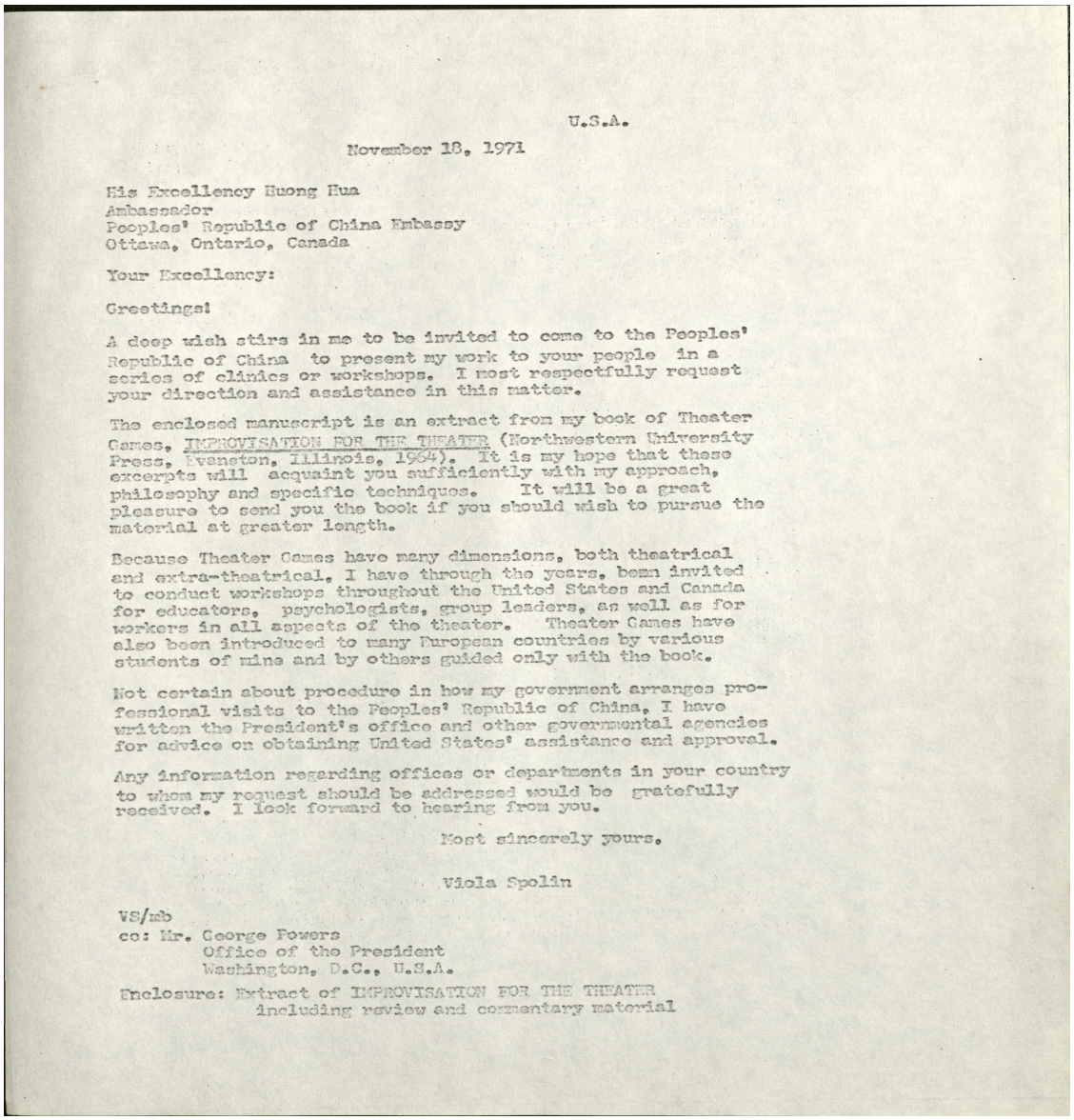
Spolin's work was a continuation of Boyd's, but Spolin had found that she could use and adapt the games to solve problems her students were having and at this moment Improvisation as we know it now was born. In 1959 Sills opened the Second City which built performances through improvisation and shortly after opening, he asked Spolin to join as a director.

Spolin as sidecoach and player at a workshop in Salt Lake City (Spolin, *Salt Lake City Photos*).

Spolin's work utilizing games to educate culminated in her landmark *Improvisation for the Theater* being published in 1963. Currently in its third edition, this text is still widely used and highly regarded in many acting circles. This text also marked the first-time improvisation had been written about at length and is why she is regarded as the mother of improvisation in the United States. Spolin was always pushing to get her work out to more and more people as she did not see any limit to the educational power of improvisation and by the 1970's she was back in Hollywood.

Spolin's Games Go To Hollywood and Beyond

From Hollywood, she aimed to reach across the world with her improvisational techniques. She attempted to work with China to increase communication and good relations between America and China by utilizing her improvisational methods. She even went as far as writing the Chinese ambassador about her idea, but I could not find any response in the archive. I have reproduced her letter on the next page:



U.S.A.

November 18, 1971

His Excellency Huong Hua
Ambassador
Peoples' Republic of China Embassy
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

Your Excellency:

Greetings!

A deep wish stirs in me to be invited to come to the Peoples' Republic of China to present my work to your people in a series of clinics or workshops. I most respectfully request your direction and assistance in this matter.

The enclosed manuscript is an extract from my book of Theater Games, IMPROVISATION FOR THE THEATER (Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 1964). It is my hope that these excerpts will acquaint you sufficiently with my approach, philosophy and specific techniques. It will be a great pleasure to send you the book if you should wish to pursue the material at greater length.

Because Theater Games have many dimensions, both theatrical and extra-theatrical, I have through the years, been invited to conduct workshops throughout the United States and Canada for educators, psychologists, group leaders, as well as for workers in all aspects of the theater. Theater Games have also been introduced to many European countries by various students of mine and by others guided only with the book.

Not certain about procedure in how my government arranges professional visits to the Peoples' Republic of China, I have written the President's office and other governmental agencies for advice on obtaining United States' assistance and approval.

Any information regarding offices or departments in your country to whom my request should be addressed would be gratefully received. I look forward to hearing from you.

Most sincerely yours,

Viola Spolin

VS/mb
cc: Mr. George Powers
Office of the President
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.

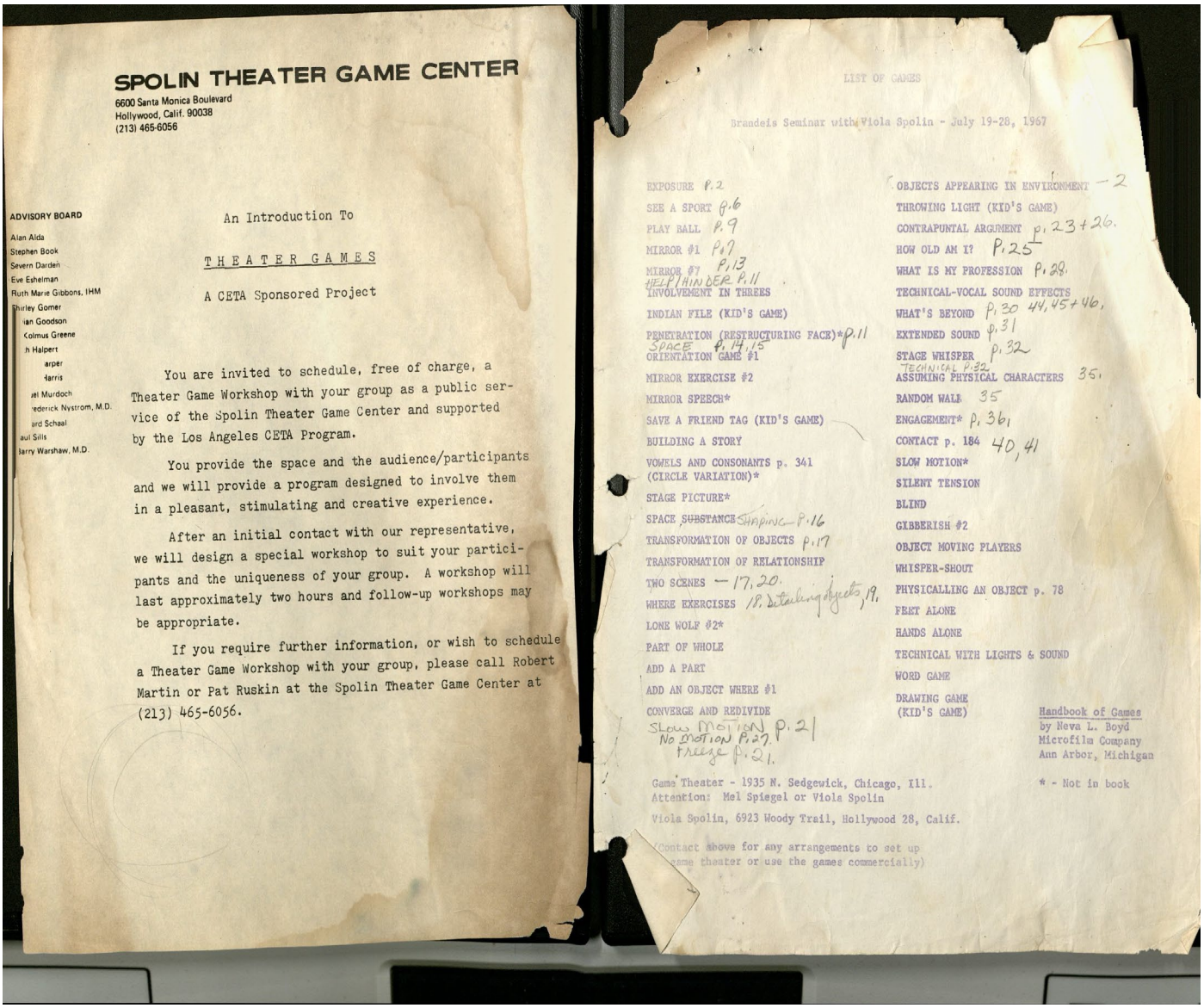
Enclosure: Extract of IMPROVISATION FOR THE THEATER
including review and commentary material

Spolin's letter to the Chinese Ambassador proclaiming the "extra-theatrical" value of improvisational games. (Spolin, *China*)

She again makes clear that improvisational games have dimensions that are both "theatrical and extra-theatrical" (*China*). To Spolin, her methods had the power to educate not only across the metaphorical borders between academic disciplines and various career fields, but they also had the power to reach across the actual borders between countries.

Spolin was actively trying to get her work on improvisational self-evaluation titled *What's Your Score?* published during this time but was unable to get the work picked up by any publishers. She had registered the manuscript for copyright with the Writer's Guild of America in May 1969, but was seeking publication until at least 1975 according to her letters (Spolin, *Manuscript Registration*) Interestingly, she does say in a letter to Viking Press that she hasn't sent the book to Northwestern Press (who had published all of her previous work) as she has chosen not to have them publish another of her works (Spolin, *Ann Hancock Letter*). Her next published work *Theater Games for Rehearsal*, published in 1985, was published by Northwestern so I am more inclined to see her avoidance of Northwestern publishing *What's Your Score?* as a desire to publish her work beyond the academic sphere than anything else. Several publishers expressed interest in revised versions of the manuscript but as is characteristic of improvisation they felt the work was "interesting, but not organized" (Spolin, *Zev Buffman Letter*) Though she never published *What's Your Score?* the manuscript is housed at Northwestern and I utilize her evaluation pedagogy in chapter 5 of this dissertation on improvisational methods of assessment.

In 1975 Spolin again published her games for classroom teachers in *Theater Game File* and in 1976 she opened the Spolin Theater Game Center (Lurie).



SPOLIN THEATER GAME CENTER
6600 Santa Monica Boulevard
Hollywood, Calif. 90038
(213) 465-6056

ADVISORY BOARD
Alan Alda
Stephen Book
Severn Darden
Eve Eshelman
Ruth Marie Gibbons, IHM
Shirley Gomer
ian Goodson
Kolmus Greene
h Halpert
arper
Harris
el Murdoch
rederick Nystrom, M.D.
ard Schaal
aul Sills
Barry Warshaw, M.D.

An Introduction To

THEATER GAMES

A CETA Sponsored Project

You are invited to schedule, free of charge, a Theater Game Workshop with your group as a public service of the Spolin Theater Game Center and supported by the Los Angeles CETA Program.

You provide the space and the audience/participants and we will provide a program designed to involve them in a pleasant, stimulating and creative experience.

After an initial contact with our representative, we will design a special workshop to suit your participants and the uniqueness of your group. A workshop will last approximately two hours and follow-up workshops may be appropriate.

If you require further information, or wish to schedule a Theater Game Workshop with your group, please call Robert Martin or Pat Ruskin at the Spolin Theater Game Center at (213) 465-6056.

LIST OF GAMES

Brandeis Seminar with Viola Spolin - July 19-28, 1967

EXPOSURE p.2
SEE A SPORT p.6
PLAY BALL p.9
MIRROR #1 p.9
MIRROR #7 p.13
HELP/HINDER p.11
INVOLVEMENT IN THREES
INDIAN FILE (KID'S GAME)
PENETRATION (RESTRUCTURING FACE)* p.11
SPACE p.14,15
ORIENTATION GAME #1
MIRROR EXERCISE #2
MIRROR SPEECH*
SAVE A FRIEND TAG (KID'S GAME)
BUILDING A STORY
VOWELS AND CONSONANTS p. 341
(CIRCLE VARIATION)*
STAGE PICTURE*
SPACE SUBSTANCE Shaping p.16
TRANSFORMATION OF OBJECTS p.17
TRANSFORMATION OF RELATIONSHIP
TWO SCENES — 17,20.
WHERE EXERCISES 18. Detailing Objects, 19.
LONE WOLF #2*
PART OF WHOLE
ADD A PART
ADD AN OBJECT WHERE #1
CONVERGE AND REDIVIDE
Slow Motion p.21
No Motion p.27
Freeze p.21.

OBJECTS APPEARING IN ENVIRONMENT — 2
THROWING LIGHT (KID'S GAME)
CONTRAPUNTAL ARGUMENT p. 23+26.
HOW OLD AM I? p.25
WHAT IS MY PROFESSION p.28.
TECHNICAL-VOCAL SOUND EFFECTS
WHAT'S BEYOND p.30 44,45+46,
EXTENDED SOUND p.31
STAGE WHISPER p.32
TECHNICAL p.32
ASSUMING PHYSICAL CHARACTERS 35.
RANDOM WALK 35
ENGAGEMENT* p.36
CONTACT p. 184 40,41
SLOW MOTION*
SILENT TENSION
BLIND
GIBBERISH #2
OBJECT MOVING PLAYERS
WHISPER-SHOUT
PHYSICALLING AN OBJECT p. 78
FEET ALONE
HANDS ALONE
TECHNICAL WITH LIGHTS & SOUND
WORD GAME
DRAWING GAME
(KID'S GAME)

Handbook of Games
by Neva L. Boyd
Microfilm Company
Ann Arbor, Michigan

* - Not in book

Game Theater - 1935 N. Sedgewick, Chicago, Ill.
Attention: Mel Spiegel or Viola Spolin

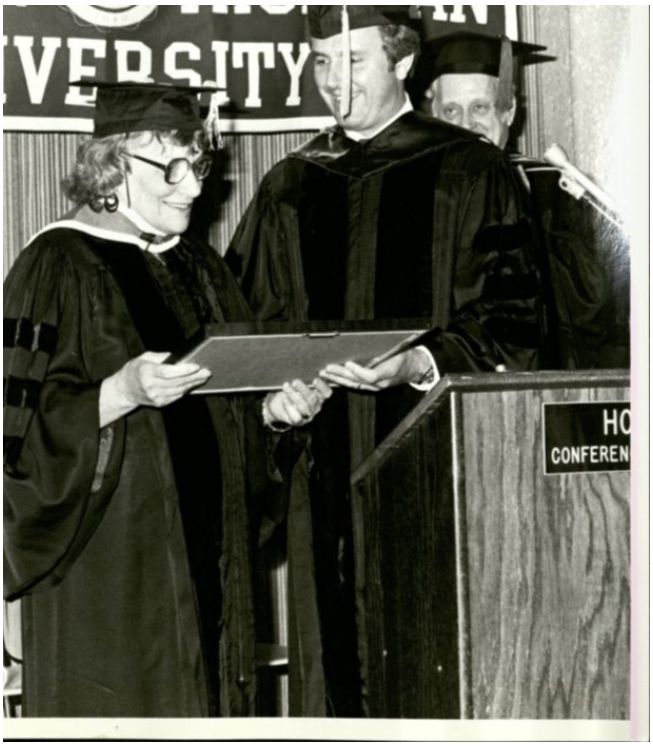
Viola Spolin, 6923 Woody Trail, Hollywood 28, Calif.

(Contact above for any arrangements to set up
game theater or use the games commercially)

An introduction to and list demonstrating the variety of games at the Spolin Game Center. (Spolin, *Spolin Game Center File*).

According to Lurie, Spolin split her time in the STGC between teaching, playing the games, and further research into the games application "into extra-theatrical fields" (Lurie). It was around this time that her work began to see recognition beyond the sphere of acting. She was getting job offers from all across the country in diverse areas such as Native American Affairs, Mental Health, Nursing, and Higher Academia to name a few (Spolin, *Job Offers 0001*). She was even awarded an

honorary doctorate at the time and lectured at a few colleges around the country including Brandeis and The University of Southern California.



Spolin receiving her honorary doctorate from Eastern Michigan University in 1979 (Spolin, *Eastern Michigan Honorary Doctorate*).

Spolin's next published book would be 1985's *Theater Games for Rehearsal.* Fans of the Rob Reiner film *Stand By Me* that enjoyed the chemistry between the four male leads have Spolin to thanks as Reiner utilized Spolin's games to help the actors get to know one another. Reiner said of Spolin's principles that "they formed the basis of all the work I've done, not only on stage, but also in television and film" in the foreword to one of the updated edition of *Theater Games for Rehearsal* (xiv). Her best-selling work *Theater Games for The Classroom* was published in 1986. This would be the last of her works to be published during her lifetime as *Theater Games for the Lone Actor* would be published in 2001 after her death in 1994 due to complications from several strokes. She lived out her final years unable to teach but kept working on her final manuscript, a handbook on education, which is still unpublished though some pieces of it are housed at Northwestern. A section of this

book titled "Words to the Wise Teacher" had been taking shape for years and excerpts from and references to "Words to the Wise Teacher" permeate all of her notes spanning her entire career.

It is truly a shame she was never able to publish her education handbook as I believe it would have been her magnum opus; a true adaptation of her improvisational games to education in both practice and theory. Spolin's entire life work was an exploration of play and learning, experience and education, improvisation and discovery and it is for that reason that she has become more than a pedagogical mentor to me. Like an improvisational actor building on both what they had experienced and the reality around them to create something new on stage, Spolin took what Stanislavski had accomplished and added the work of Boyd to it to synthesize something new. Her improvisational techniques still continue to offer us so much in education broadly but also in composition specifically. Viola Spolin was a pioneer in a world of passengers and in shining the spotlight of composition on her improvisational pedagogy, I hope to inspire other educators to push forward and experience new pedagogical methods in our classrooms so that we may discover some of the spark that keeps Spolin's flame burning so brightly.

3: PLAYING AND EMBODIED LEARNING AS PRAXIS OF POTENTIAL DISCOVERY

Moments of uncertainty will happen in the classroom. As teachers we create rigid lesson plans to cut down on these moments and that is understandable. After all, we all want to make sure we are teaching them something valuable instead of going off on tangents about all sorts of things related to the classroom. Students create notes and sometimes have assignments written out that will help them say what they want in class. I've witnessed these kinds of "discussion" circles before both as a student and teacher. One student reads a response, another reads a response that is vaguely similar, maybe one reads a completely different response, but students rarely stop and look up from their papers to have a conversation with one another about what they've said. The teacher, tied to a lesson plan out of fear of the unknown that may arise as soon as they let go, fights to keep the discussion "on course." Both we and our students cling to these premade ideas and they try to score points with us for having the best response. As writing teachers, I think we can do better. I think we can create classrooms where both students and teachers let these scaffolds fall to the wayside.

Together, with our students, we can organically facilitate the discovery of new knowledge every day through their interchange of ideas with one another. We can teach students to embrace moments of uncertainty in the classroom and work together to find solutions to them that have relevance to the world's my students live in. An improvisational pedagogy based in Viola Spolin's techniques and games will allow students to play through their uncertainties and learn to embrace these moments as moments brimming with potential discovery. This chapter utilizes Spolin's improvisational pedagogy in the composition classroom and establishes it as the next step beyond student-centered pedagogy to discovery centered pedagogy. Building off of Spolin's work, I argue that through group agreement and active listening we can cultivate classroom communities where students' experiences and individual identities are valued as pathways to discovery in moments of

uncertainty. My goal is to allow students to build on the knowledge already assembled in the university and then adapt that knowledge for use in their own lives is the way forward for all of us as composition teachers.

We Want You…To Play!

Looking to Viola Spolin's life work on play and improvisational education provides teachers with an unexplored avenue to provide students the agency necessary to create knowledge in their own worlds and not simply remember what has come before. The power of this concept of building and adapting knowledge is demonstrated perfectly in D.W. Winnicott's seminal book *Playing and Reality* in which he writes "The place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play" (100). To Winnicott, play is the first and most important site of learning. It takes lived experience to build knowledge rather than rely solely on what has been established before. It teaches the individual about the world and the cultures within it. In this way the player gains agency over their world. I like to think of a child throwing a ball at a wall. That child might see the ball bounce back and learn how the ball will operate when thrown at one spot on the wall. However, if the same child throws the ball higher or lower or if he gives the ball to a friend to throw, that same ball might do different things. The experience of playing with the many different combinations of ball and wall is what educates the child about the world around them and give them the agency to suggest new combinations of ball and wall based in their experiences. Conceptualizing of composition pedagogy based in improvisation can answer the calls of critical pedagogies and as such it is imperative we integrate improvisational pedagogy based in play into our classroom. In so doing, we can utilize Spolin's

games and the theory behind them to make our composition classrooms communities focused on moving through uncertainty to discovery together.

When I say critical pedagogies above what I mean is what Ann George in *Critical Pedagogies: Dreaming of Democracy* defines as pedagogies that "engage students in analysis of the unequal power relations that produce and are produced by cultural institutions (including schools) and they hope to enable students to change this inequality" (77). These pedagogies stress education as a crucial factor in citizenship and "attempt to reinvent the roles of teachers and students in the classroom and the kind of activities they engage in" (78). In this chapter I will examine explicitly how an improvisational pedagogy rises to the call of critical pedagogies specifically for students, and in the next I'll examine its role for teachers (or perhaps teacher's role in it).

In the teacher-centered, top-down model, there is no room for the students' own input. Knowledge is not built here, but rather passed down so that it cannot change, but only be reinforced. Moments of improvisation in the classroom are stamped out in favor of moments of pre-planned learning. The lesson is already known. Nothing new can come of it. This is essentially Paulo Friere's infamous concept of the "banking model' of education from his classic work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider know nothing" (72). So, instead of thinking critically at the time when we would most like them to (when their immediate world-view is threatened), our students simply memorize the correct way to respond because to them we are the keeper of knowledge while they are merely its passive recipient. Spolin calls this the approval/disapproval model and warns in *Improvisation for Theater* that in this model "We do not know our own substance, and in the attempt to live through (or avoid living through) the eyes of others, self-identity is obscured, our bodies become misshapen, natural grace is gone, and learning is affected" (7). Thus,

the only action students can take is to avoid punishment rather than to truly learn. The students really only "learns" that they cannot contribute to the process of creating new knowledge. They are passengers in the learning process rather than drivers in their own lives. But play, by its very nature, allows for interrogation and subversion of traditions.

As Spolin writes in *Theater Games for the Classroom* "Play is democratic! Anyone can play! Everyone can learn through playing! Play touches and stimulates vitality, awakening the whole person – mind and body, intelligence and creativity, spontaneity and intuition – when all, teacher and students together, are attentive to the moment" (3). In play, the same kind of student agency called for in critical pedagogies is made manifest. Play also upsets the balance of power as students can use play to gain authority over their own process of learning. According to Spolin "Outside of play there are few places where children can contribute to the world in which they find themselves. Their world, controlled by adults who tell them what to do and when to do it, offers them little opportunity to act or accept community responsibility" (3). Spolin's games are designed to "offer students the opportunity for equal freedom, respect, and responsibility within the community of the schoolroom" (3). In this pedagogy, play is emancipatory functioning as a simulation of the world outside of the classroom and allows students to become creators of knowledge instead of consumers of it.

Utilizing the techniques of improvisation for composition pedagogy allows students to find value in the ability to adapt knowledge to their own lives and not understand learning only as their instructors have told them. As Spolin writes in *Improvisation for Theater* "The student cannot always do what the teacher hopes, but as progress is made, capacities will enlarge. Work with students where they are, not where you think they should be" (10). If we are to achieve the goals of critical pedagogies, rote teaching and memorization of flash cards and facts is too limiting to the

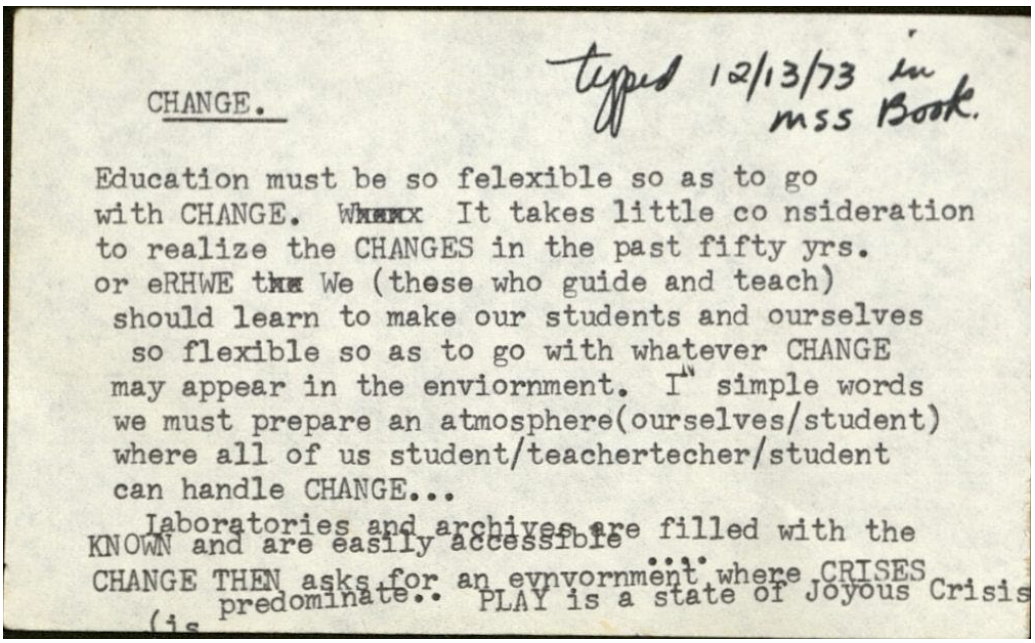
development of our students. We must meet them where they are. In her notes Spolin says of rote teaching that it "has to be memorizing, has to be giving a set and limited condition that we have called success and which we have called goal. Why impose our limitations on the growing organism. Authoritarianism fits in right here because it is authoritarianism that sets the limit" (*Education Notes 70's*). When we impose our own limits on others by merely teaching them what we already know we deny their own human ability and agency to create their own knowledge. We need not throw out all that has come before though as Spolin explains at length in her notes:

> Education then should become a dedication towards the unknown – never to the known. The known are but steps to help in finding the unknown, and if the known becomes our goal, we limit ourselves (with exception of the few who will burst through the limitations) and our children (culture) to memorize (cerebral) for the sake of memory (limited goals) thus killing off life giving forces of extension… not extension of memory, but extension of the WHOLE into new as yet unknown areas that will be used as memory to be remembered by future generations… which then limits them. (*Knowing/Risking*)

Rather than teach our students to discover new knowledge, a model based in what has come before simply limits our students' potential to discover what is unknown. Of "the findings of others" Spolin poetically writes "repeating them changes the eagle into the parrot" (*Knowing/Risking*). Why limit our students' human potential? We need to unleash our students' potential for curiosity and discovery. Thankfully, we can borrow from other humanities disciplines such as theater to do so through play.

As Spolin writes "In playing the demand of the rule sets up a natural challenge. Response to this challenge results in: transience of the moment (transformation) This moment of challenge is similar to the fight/flight survival mechanism (necessary for energy) {at} moment of crisis"

(*Fight/flight*). In this model students can utilize the space of the classroom to test out ideas and discover new things about their worlds instead of having knowledge handed down to them by authorities. It's fight or flight in a safe space. Sure, this can be scary, but Spolin would argue that it should be in order for students to change the way they think and truly learn. Spolin tell us "laboratories and archives are filled with the known and are easily accessible change then asks for an environment where crises predominate… play is a state of joyous crisis" (*Change*).



CHANGE.

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Education must be so felexible so as to go
with CHANGE. WHXXXX It takes little co nsideration
to realize the CHANGES in the past fifty yrs.
or eRHWE tXX We (these who guide and teach)
should learn to make our students and ourselves
so flexible so as to go with whatever CHANGE
may appear in the enviornment. I" simple words
we must prepare an atmosphere(ourselves/student)
where all of us student/teachertecher/student
can handle CHANGE...
Laboratories and archives are filled with the
KNOWN and are easily accessible ....
CHANGE THEN asks for an evnvornment where CRISES
predominate.. PLAY is a state of Joyous Crisis
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Spolin's own words from above with the emphasis illustrate her passion for teaching. (Spolin, *Change*).

Here, we return to the idea of uncertainty, but the fear often associated with uncertainty is removed and instead it can be embraced as a place of change and discovery. For Spolin "Learning takes place in crises in the imbalance… Playing creates this imbalance and the problem of the game is solved within this and so learning takes place" (Spolin, *Education 60's and 70's*). So, games simulate the imbalance/chaos of life and in this simulation students' fight or flight response forces their body and mind into action. This action is the students playing as they try solutions for the focus of the game and in this playing, students learn and discover. Thus, uncertainty becomes less a state of fear and more a state of potential discovery.

One of my favorite games to start a semester with is Spolin's Alphabet Soup. In this game the focus is simply on saying a sentence that begins with the next letter of the alphabet from you partner. So, if I said "A great way to teach is through improvisation." My partner would respond "But I don't know how." Then I could say "Cool, let me show you how." This pattern continues until both players make it to the letter they started on. I love using this game as an icebreaker on the first day of the semester and have noticed even the most reticent of participants laughing right along by the time we finish the game. This simple game prepares students to work together to solve problems and gets them to confront their fears of being wrong or saying something that their classmates perceive as dumb because the stakes are so low an even silly things keep the game moving. After playing just a few short rounds of Alphabet Soup, my students are laughing and comparing sentences with tricky letters like X and Q. Compared to the stale icebreakers I've used in the past, Alphabet Soup not only lets my students have more fun, but in subtle ways it prepares them for the type of collaboration and idea exchange they will be participating in all semester.

Games don't need to be merely supplemental like Alphabet Soup though. In my own Freshman Composition classes I have used games to bring life to what would otherwise be rote teaching. When teaching the rhetorical appeals (ethos, pathos, and logos) I adapt an improvisational game called "Pitchman" from *Theater Games for the Classroom* to get my students working with the appeals and thinking critically about their applications. Spolin tells us the focus of this game is "on communicating with the audience" and the purpose of the game is "to break down barriers between players and audience" (173). Basically, this is a game about relating to one's audience. Essentially, this is how the three rhetorical appeals function anyway, so I put my students into groups and allow them a few minutes to brainstorm a product and come up with a short advertisement for it. After each group goes, we discuss how they used various appeals in their advertisement skit as a class and finally after all groups have gone I have each group turn in a write up of their advertisement and

product that includes their target audience and how they attempted to communicate their product and relate to that audience. In this game my students act out their ideas then reflect on how those ideas relate to the course and beyond thus enacting a Freirean Praxis all while having fun and maintain a higher degree of authority over their learning process than if I simply had them memorize the rhetorical appeals and define them for me on a test.

A pedagogy rooted in play in which students are free to design their own solutions to problems in the classroom therefore promotes action in students by allowing them to make their own choices when learning rather than simply memorizing As Spolin says in her notes "Choices are given so as to remove passivity" (*Passivity and Waiting*). Students need to be able to have options in learning. We can't simply rearrange the same assignments they have seen over and over or have them memorize flash cards. For Friere, learning takes place in "action and reflection" which he calls Praxis (87). Rather than make our students passive recipients, he proposes we use dialogue with others to create the world through our mutual actions and reflections (88-89). I want my students to be autonomous agents in the creation of knowledge just as Friere does, not to simply rehash what has come before. Spolin also sees the necessity for action and reflection for learning to take place. This is clear in her definition of Intuition and its role in improvisation. In *Theater Games for The Classroom* she writes "The intuitive can only be felt in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us" (4). Just like actors in an improvisational performance, both students and teachers must dialogue with each other utilizing action and reflection in order to build knowledge together. This is slightly different from Friere as she wants to spend less time theorizing and reflecting after the fact and more time repeating games because "Using intuition cannot be taught. One must be tripped into it" (4). Improvisation provides a ready-made conduit through which Praxis takes place although for Spolin it happens more in repeated experience than in reflection afterward, I believe both theorists

are essentially making the same point. That point being that change only takes place when one acts and is able to understand how that act effects those in their communities and beyond. In this way our students can dialogue with the worlds around them as they solve problems and learn from those worlds and shape them.

Listen to Your Bodymind

Crucially, as Marth Munro writes in *Mapping Lessac Kinesensics* "Playfulness accepts (and celebrates) the uncertainty of the freedom to explore, but acknowledge such boundaries that are ethical and physical. Thus, playfulness is determined as a means of exploration with the intention to discover" (15). When students have the freedom to play with ideas that make them uncertain in class they apply them to their own lives so as to not appropriate the discourse of their professors simply because of the age-old authoritarian reason "because I said so." Simply put, play allows students to explore their own solutions. Play allows to for students to ask "what if I tried this?" Clearly, play has utility in a critical pedagogy, but theorists of feminist pedagogies have also seen the value in play as a learning tool. In "Writing as Feminist Rhetorical Theory" Laura Micciche explains how play functions in feminist pedagogies writing of play "It's more akin to a serious effort to organize meaning around a logic of one's own making rather than one provided or assumed. Such an effort embraces assertions of agency and intention. Play is difficult, risky business when it comes to writing because the possibilities are endless" (183). Play is not easy. Play can be chaotic and almost certainly has uncertain results, but that's what allows our students to use play to make discoveries. If students only deal with what we as teachers know or what they already know then where is the space for learning? After all, we can only learn what we don't already know.

I want to facilitate a classroom environment where students can utilize the experiences they bring to the class to inform the learning the do in class and vice versa and I believe a pedagogy

rooted in improvisation through play can do so. Returning to the child with the ball example, I want to think a bit here about just how important experience is to learning. Building off of the work of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and acting and vocal trainer Arthur Lessac, Melissa Hurt writes in *Arthur Lessac's Embodied Actor Training* that "All of the actor's senses take in their surroundings and she (her body) creates meaning *in the moment*. She responds to the world because her body (she) link perception and action" (8). Like the child with the ball, all of the sensations that make up the experience of throwing the ball at the wall come together to form knowledge of what that ball will do when thrown at a wall. The child knows how hard to throw the ball or where to aim to get it to go where they want it because of repeated experience. This process feels organic because nobody told the child where to throw the ball but through experience the child discovered which actions would result in which experience and can then mentally sort through these experiences almost like an unconscious file cabinet to select how and where to throw the ball. The Praxis of experience and theorizing about it creates a conception of what the ball will do. Like an athlete practicing the same play over and over until it becomes reflex, the child throwing the ball eventually comes to know how to throw the ball organically as they experience it through their body.

The necessity of lived experience to learning is such that Hurt (and others) refer to the body and mind as the "bodymind." In *Mind the Gap: Beyond Whole-brain Learning* Marth Munro and Marie-Heleen Coetzee write "The bodymind activates movement, sensation, perception, mood, feeling/emotion, behavior, thought and memory. It can modify or re-establish patterns of learning and knowing. Sensory inputs structure the mind, and the mind cannot exist without manifestations of inner perceptions embodied" (102). So, experience is the thread that ties the mental and the physical together. As Munro further articulates "Through this deliberate playfulness the aim is to give oneself permission to explore, to experiment, to be curious about what will emerge in the moment of being" (15). Here, the inherent curiosity in play leads to organic learning for the

individual. This is truly active learning in the most literal sense. As Spolin writes in her notes "Body-mind alertness accompanies active play or play about to become active" (*Play*). I see no reason we could not substitute active play for active learning here. Spolin also clearly saw how play utilizing one's bodymind represented Praxis writing "The body may be highly active as in a ball game, an environment may be very chaotic…but the ability of a player to be simultaneously 1) active 2) quietly observing makes at once a fine player an awakened individual and produces a field for further growth" (Play). Not only does the individual in this example excel due to the active role the body takes in this example, but the individual is able to build upon their successes as they quietly observe (or "reflect" to use Frierian terms) through the mind. Again, this happens in the moment for Spolin (hence improvisation/spontaneity) rather than after as it would for Friere (action/reflection), but I do not think that in any way makes the two incompatible. If anything, I'd argue Spolin's methods are just a natural evolution of Friere's where instead of acting and then reflecting both action and reflection happen in the moment to produce discovery.

None of this action and reflection happens in a vacuum in our classrooms. Ideally, each student will be able to act and reflect using their bodymind individually in order to further the knowledge of the classroom community. So, if our students can't play and share experiences with one another, then there is no learning taking place. At best there is rote memorization and at worst not even that. Or as Spolin herself writes "out of the head into the body into the space is no idle phrase…for when so-called "learning" is only in the head to become memory… it dies for lack of nourishment" (Contrapuntal Argument and Learning). When experience and knowledge aren't intertwined neither provide the opportunities for discovery they could if we use play to unite them. Here, I will to explore how we might use the tools of improvisation to build classrooms in which students can not only utilize the experiences of their bodyminds from both in and outside the classroom to create moments in the composition classroom in which the entire classroom

community can experience the kind of organic learning. There are two major theoretical ideas improvisational theatre, both stemming from Spolin, that I believe can create the communities of students/players based in a collective curiosity for discovery and they are staying on focus and group agreement. The keys to achieving these two ideas are "Yes and…" and listening.

Focus on the Community

In *Theater Games for The Classroom* Spolin tells us each game has a focus which in her terms "is a problem that is essential to playing that can be solved by the players," it "sets the game in motion" and staying on focus "generates the energy needed for playing which is then channeled and flows through the given structure of the game to shape the event" (5). Crucially, and like in critical pedagogies, "the effort to stay on focus and the uncertainty about outcome diminish prejudices, create mutual support, and generate organic involvement in playing" (5). The focus of each game drives the game and each game diminishes prejudices and creates support. So, in this way Spolin's pedagogy is already in line with critical pedagogies. According to Spolin in *Improvisation for the Theater* it's functions are 1) helps isolate complex individual techniques for thorough exploration, 2) helps discipline actors creative energies, 3)by keeping focused on one changing, moving aspect of the exercise students can develop capacity for solving the problem while working with others, and 4) the single focus on a moving point allows students freedom for spontaneous action and discovery (22). What if each activity or lesson we taught in the composition classroom was centered in this way? Here, we aren't focusing on doing what I as a teacher feel is most important to learn or what my students feel like I want them to say, but we are combining what I know to be important with what their experiences and identities make important and what comes out of this is neither a prescribed lesson from a teacher going through the motions or a set of random talking point from students hoping to identify what their teacher thinks is important. What comes from this improvisational

pedagogy is a focus on transforming what we already have into something new that can immediately have tangible effects on students' lives because it is based in the experiences they have already lived and will continue to live when they leave our classrooms. To me, this offers up a whole new conception of the composition classroom not as student or teacher-centered but as discovery centered.

Barbara Schapiro has also called for teachers to attempt to establish such a space where neither the teacher nor students are the center, but rather the course material and more importantly, the processes used to analyze it are the driving force. In this kind of classroom which Schapiro calls the "third space" there is a demand for focus on the actual mental process that governs the classroom. In her article "Negotiating a Third Space in the Classroom" Schapiro writes:

> The process of passionate critical inquiry, like the analytic process in the clinic, can create that third thing in the classroom in which both teacher and student surrender. From this perspective, the central dynamic in the classroom would then become a matter of surrendering to a process rather than asserting or relinquishing authority in relation to students. Neither the teacher's nor the student's voices need to be suppressed. From an intersubjective perspective, one can only find one's own voice in dialogue in relation to another's. (434)

In the third space Schapiro describes surrendering to discovery becomes the center of the course. I believe making the focus of each game the driving force for each class or classroom activity is an actualization of Schapiro's theoretical viewpoint. Schapiro is careful to point out that we must model this third space for our students, that we cannot simply hope for them to value critical inquiry as we do, but that we must "model for our students, finally, the struggle to inhabit that third space of intersubjectivity" (437). Spolin warns of the dangers of this too writing "Pitfalls may become that

games are seen by students as just another way to manipulate them into doing what the teacher wants them to do" (*Pay Attention*). Here, it is crucial that the teacher pay attention and notice these moments and change the game being played or the players roles in the game, but not step in and tell the students what to do. Even in the third space, the teacher is head facilitator and active participant, but not a keeper of knowledge. I will return to this idea of teacher as head facilitator at length in the next chapter about teaching as a side coach. For now, I'll expand more on how to utilize focus building on discovery as the "third space" center our classroom communities.

Praxis (action/reflection) can be a powerful key to unlocking agency and identity in our students but if they only reflect on their own actions then they'll never be able to act on the world and become the change that critical pedagogies aim for. So, we must move beyond action and self-reflection and onto action and reflection in terms of the entire classroom community. If we can achieve this result in the micro worlds of our classrooms, then there is no reason students won't carry these attributes into the larger world when they leave the university. The improvisational concept of "group agreement" is the ideal site for the "third space" kind of active learning and community engagement of students to take place.

Group Agreement and the Conversation of Studentkind

In her notes, Spolin writes that "Group agreement is not majority rules, but rather an acceptance of every single group member and what he is able to contribute at that exact time of his individual development and understanding and bring to the whole group project" (*Group Agreement/Minority Rules*). Here, the focus or problem to be solved creates a need for the students to act and the need for group agreement (in Spolin's terms) allows each student to contribute without fear of approval or disapproval. As Spolin writes in *Improvisation for the Theater* "the student-actors integrate and find themselves within the whole activity. The differences as well as the similarities

within the group are accepted. A group should never be used to induce conformity, but as in a game, to spur action" (10). In the kind of group agreement Spolin is aiming for students can not only play to discover new, personally relevant solutions to problems, but they can do so in ways where they learn from each other rather than from the teacher. As a teacher in this classroom, I merely assign the problem and facilitate students' ability to solve it to together. The students come up with their own solutions by building off of their own differing (and converging) facets of experience. There is no "because I told you so" in this model. Instead students gain the agency to respond to "because I told you so" with "but have you tried this?"

The idea of a group in which each member builds off of what comes before is certainly no new idea for writing studies. Think of Kenneth Brufee's "Collaborative Learning and Conversation of Mankind" in which he traces collaborative learning in American colleges to its roots in the 1970s when it began to come into practice in order to contend with a wave of new students coming into college with had trouble "adapting to the traditional or 'normal' conventions of the college classroom" (637). Through methods such as peer editing and tutoring and class group work collaborative changed not what people learned, but "the social context in which they learned it" (638) and as this change happened, "students' work tended to improve" (638). So, even though traditional top-down education may have eluded these students, when they were able to work with others and add a social component to their work, that work improved. Brufee traces this improvement to the fact that knowledge is actually a "conversation of mankind." He thinks of thought as an internal conversation in the mind and claims "the first steps to learning to think better, therefore, are learning to converse better…" (640). Here, I don't think it's a stretch to say this is the kind of dialogue expected in an improvisational acting group, a classroom rooted in Praxis, and/or the improvisation-based classroom I am advocating for. Most importantly for improvisation though is that Brufee says we must learn to "converse" better not simply ho to talk better. Like in

improvisational acting, we must build the scene we are in by paying careful attention to what has come before and what is currently happening.

Think of the research paper students so often write to prove a point they already had coming into the class. Think of the prewritten response to the reading the student did for homework to prepare them for class discussion. These are just talking. One voice speaks and follows a straight-line trajectory to its conclusion. Often students will start out wanting to argue something like Marijuana should be legal and talk about people that agree with them and what they already believe for however many pages we require. They will cite sources that already agree with their conclusions and pull quotes to make them look as though they had read more than just the abstract of the article they are quoting. But if writing is a conversation or a scene like in improvisation then they are doing their conversational partner (often in the case of a research paper this is the teacher) or their scene partner a terrible injustice. Here, the student is talking at someone rather than having a conversation. If we think of writing like a conversation in a scene being improvised than the actors need to listen to one another and tailor their skills for the particular person they are acting with and the audience they act for. We talk about these theoretical ideas in composition class when we teach the rhetorical situation, but improvisation allows us to actualize them and make them real for students. Improvisation is a ready-made methodology through which we can show students how to talk and listen to each other. Spolin's Theater Games for the Classroom has two whole chapters dedicated to games that improve communication. Many of these games can be boiled down to what is perhaps the most famous technique from improvisation is key to facilitating these conversations rooted in group agreement which I will discuss at length in the next section.

"Yes And…"

Though Spolin was certainly the most influential improviser and teacher, Del Close and Charna Halpern picked up the baton she presented and ran with it. Close was student of Spolin's and Halpern a student of Close's. Whereas Spolin often connects her games and exercises to education explicitly, their work focuses more exclusively on the improvisational performer which will aid us as we look specifically at student applications of improvisation. "Yes and…" is more implied in Spolin's writings on group agreement than directed stated, but Halpern would later give us a definition of this concept. As Halpern writes in *Truth in Comedy* "Agreement is the one rule that can never be broken: the players must be in agreement to forward the action of the scene" (47). "Yes and…" keeps that agreement happening. According to Halpern "Yes and…" means "that whenever two actors are on stage, they agree with each other to the Nth degree. If one asks the other a question, the other must respond positively, and then provide additional information, no matter how small…" (46). She further clarifies saying "Answering 'Yes but…' stops any continued growth, while a flat 'No' erases the block that has just been established" (47). In improvisation it is crucial that all actors continue to build toward something and as soon as one actor stops that by saying no, the whole scene can collapse and whatever was being build will crumble. Spolin does not directly reference "Yes and…" as a technique since it grew from her work. However, the seeds of "Yes and…" have clearly been planted in some of Spolin's reminders from *Improvisation for the Theater* such as "Individual freedom (self expression) while respecting community responsibility (group agreement) is our goal" and "When players are always alerted and willing to come to each other's aid as needed, each member of the cast is given a sense of security" (44-45). Halpern makes this even more clear writing "Denying the reality that is created on stage ends the progression of the scene, and destroys any chance of achieving a group consciousness" (48). Here, the notion of a group consciousness is interchangeable with that of group agreement as both focus on the moving forward

toward discovery as a whole rather than as fragmented individuals. Spolin also makes clear that this is not blind agreement, but that through careful listening, individuals say "Yes and…" to the reality around them. I can think of a time I came into a scene while doing improvisational acting and I was told there was a withholding father. I decided to be this character since he was needed in the scene and so whenever I was asked for something by one of the actors playing my children I would say no. This could seem counter intuitive to "Yes and…" but my fellow actor told me I was withholding so in saying no to a request in scene I am actually saying "Yes and…" to the reality being created by myself and fellow actors on stage.

Think of a classroom discussion that got derailed not because a student was thinking about something someone else said in a new, exciting way, but because each student had a prepared point to make and nothing to prepared to say about other perspectives. I want my students to "Yes and…" one another through discussions in order to organically explore and discover how classroom conversations can extend beyond the walls of the classroom. The "yes" acknowledges the reality being presented as valid and the "and" allows for students to push what has been said into discovery. Of course, this requires communication, but that communication cannot be done without careful active listening to both the body and mind of fellow students.

The origins of the formal "Yes and…" rule are interesting to me as I think they illustrate how minds primed by improvisation can adapt and build knowledge. In Halpern's *Art by Committee: A Guide to Advanced Improvisation* she credits Close and others with pioneering the "Yes and…" technique (49) after a performance. The performance in question hadn't been very good and upon reflective conversation "They all agreed they had to stop arguing to get the scenes to forward. The "Yes and" theory was born" (49). After a dialogue in which Close and others reflected on their previous actions, the group was able to come up with new rules that moved them forward from a

lackluster performance in a productive way. Even the way in which the "Yes and…" for group agreement and other techniques of improvisational theater were developed had Frierian echoes of Praxis. The way these performers saw a problem, self-diagnosed a solution based in their experience and discovered a new way forwards demonstrates how I envision the students of an improvisational pedagogy operating in the world beyond our classrooms.

To me, the concept of "Yes and…" can be easily articulated by something we already do in composition classrooms (and perhaps could employ more often) the freewrite. In *Writing Without Teachers* Peter Elbow defines the freewrite as "automatic writing" or "babbling" telling us that "The idea is simply to write for ten minutes… don't stop for anything…put down what's on your mind… the only requirement is that you never stop" (3). This exercise is not graded but simply kept for the student to reflect on (I often ask students if they would like to turn them into me though) but it should not be edited. Elbow explains why he avoids editing these writing:

> "The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page. In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm--a voice--which is the main source of power in your writing. I don't know how it works, but this voice is the force that will make a reader listen to you. Maybe you don't like your voice; maybe people have made fun of it. But it's the only voice you've got. It's your only source of power. You better get back into it, no matter what you think of it. If you keep writing in it, it may change into something you like better. But if you abandon it, you'll likely never have a voice and never be heard." (6-7).

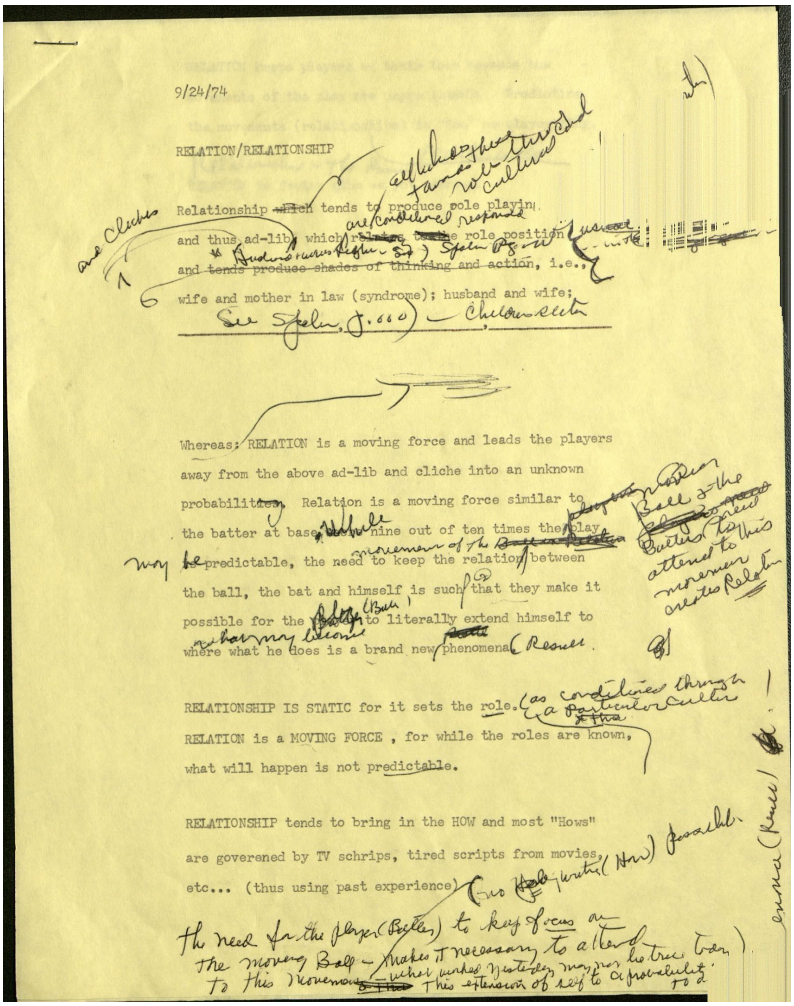
The freewrite is an improvisational tool that is not new to composition but looking at it through Spolin's improvisational lens we can adapt it to serve as more than an introduction to not self-

editing but as a place to play with ideas and take the risks necessary to make discoveries. The freewrite allows students to "Yes and…" their own ideas. In addition, when we view the freewrite through this lens we unlock its potential to serve as a tool for critical pedagogies as it values the individual's experience and identity over the standards set by society. The freewrite is a great exercise to get students thinking in a more improvisational mindset but finding one's own voice is only part of having a conversation.

Listening

Listening might seem like one of the simplest parts of an improvisational pedagogy, but listening in improvisation is crucial and when done effectively (by listening both to and with the bodymind) it keeps group agreement alive. Remember that for Spolin "the ability of a player to be simultaneously 1) active 2) quietly observing" is crucial to discovery and growth and that "A close-working group of improvisational theater often communicates on a non-verbal level with uncanny skill and swiftness" (*Improvisation…,* 45). Clearly, she is speaking both of the player's ability to observe their own body and environment but also their ability to quietly observe the body and environment of others. She makes this clear in her notes about relation versus relationship where

she gives her definitions for these terms stating "Relationship is static for it sets the role. Relation is a moving force, for while the roles are known, what will happen is not predictable" (*Relating*).



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RELATION/RELATIONSHIP

Relationship which tends to produce role playing and thus ad-lib which ~~brings~~ keeps the role position and ~~tends produce~~ shades of thinking and action, i.e., wife and mother in law (syndrome); husband and wife;

Whereas: RELATION is a moving force and leads the players away from the above ad-lib and cliche into an unknown probabilities. Relation is a moving force similar to the batter at base ~~while~~ nine out of ten times the play may be predictable, the need to keep the relation between the ball, the bat and himself is such that they make it possible for the ~~batter~~ to literally extend himself to where what he does is a brand new phenomena.

RELATIONSHIP IS STATIC for it sets the role.
RELATION is a MOVING FORCE, for while the roles are known, what will happen is not predictable.

RELATIONSHIP tends to bring in the HOW and most "Hows" are governed by TV schrips, tired scripts from movies, etc... (thus using past experience)

Spolin's notes on relationships and relations with emphasis on relationship vs relation. (Spolin, *Relating*)

For Spolin creating a relationship tends to lead one to cliché and uses constructed responses whereas relation is constantly changing and keeping players in the moment. Predicting what will happen next takes all of the players out of organic discovery. When one player tries to predict what will happen next, they start to hijack the game from others and instead of creating as a group, this player is creating for the group. Here, listening to the actions of individuals bodyminds is key as it stops individuals from trying to play write or think ahead in the conversation. This constant listening and adapting is what makes relation the more productive focus for Spolin.

In groups, students must constantly listen to one another as their relations to one another change. Once students have decided their relationships to one another (the lazy one, the hard worker, the funny one, etc…) those roles define them and students lose 1) their agency over themselves and 2) their agency to create and discover their own worlds. If a classmate is uncomfortable with where an activity or discussion is going, students can listen to the body language of that student. Listening in this respect functions much like Krista Ratcliffe's concept of Rhetorical listening that she defines as "a trope for interpretive invention and more particularly as a code of cross-cultural conduct" in her book *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, and Whiteness* (17). She continues to say that that through rhetorical listening we "continually negotiate our always evolving standpoints, our identities, with the always evolving standpoint of others" and crucially that it helps us " recognize that our standpoints are not autonomous points of static states but rather complex webs of dynamic intermingled cultural structures and subjective agency" (34). Spolin's games will have keyed them into this skill whether they realize it or not. Here, instead of acting the same as they had been previously (think relationship or static state here) the students can change their behavior in response to their classmate (relation or complex webs of dynamic intermingled cultural structures) and in this way the activity or discussion continues with everyone feeling the freedom to continue playing on their own level. Yes, this requires practice and, luckily, Spolin's games essentially function as practice for further playing and listening as mentioned above. Rather than rely on past relationships (the known) the students are adapting and changing their conceptions of each other in the moment (relation) and are able to learn from one another's experiences. Improvisation is a unique conduit through which students come to learn listening (rhetorically) through games. This kind of listening keeps group agreement alive as each student has the agency to contribute to the overall group at whatever level their experience allows but no student has a defined, unchanging role they must play. Perhaps more importantly, the kind of listening inherent in improvisation imbues

each student with that knowledge that their classmates are not mere stereotypes, but dynamic, autonomous human beings.

Dangers of Playwriting

Spolin warns that "predicting the movements (relationships) or the 'How' is playwriting" (Relating). Based on this definition, playwriting is authoritarian as it relies on what comes before and closes off possibilities of discovery, but it also destroys any chance for group agreement. We've all had a student in our classes that wants to answer every question (often meaning well) that has done similar. Though I do not think students do this with ill intentions (at least not every time) it is something to be avoided. Spolin warns in *Improvisation for the Theater* that the playwriting students:

> "Manipulate their fellow students and the stage environment for their own purposes. This "playwriting" within the group violates the group agreement, prevents process with the other players, and keeps the user from achieving an expanding creative personal experience. Playwriting is not scene improvisation. Scene improvisation can only evolve out of group agreement and paying. If playwriting continues as the session progresses, the players do not understand the focus." (43).

While the playwriting student may not intentionally be hijacking the game or lesson away from others, they certainly are because they are no longer listening to the bodyminds of those around them and working together to discover a solution to the focus. In fact, the focus is now the play the student is writing and so not only has this student hijacked their classmates' chance at discovery, but they have actually hijacked the entire class in our focus centered classroom. Not only is discovery no longer taking place, but the student has become the teacher and not because of what they have learned but because of what they "know." Listening to others is the tool that allows us to escape the

limitation of playwriting from our own first-person points of view in order to discover what we do not yet know.

Yes but…

This seems like as good a point as any to address what some may already be asking while reading this chapter: but what if students don't want to play along? This happens in improvisational theater and in our classrooms. Spolin warns that the passive student is not acting but reacting and that reaction is merely reflection of what has come before and thus authoritarian. In her words, "reflections keep everything just exactly where it is… and nothing is violated… but most importantly nothing changes…and nothing is new" (*Passivity and Waiting*). Student resistance has been called into question in critical pedagogies in America as well as Frierian liberation in a rich, democratic, capitalist nation is a complex issue. As C.H. Knoluach and Lil Brannon ask in *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy* "Who is to be liberated from what? Who gets to do the liberating?... Is the goal to make the outsider into an insider?" (60). If we attempt to do this aren't we then becoming the authority as it is the teacher that would decide who is in and who is out? Or worse, as Virgina Anderson warns in "Confrontational Teaching and Rhetorical Practice" could this turn students against us merely because of that authority and make it so "students already hunkered down in the 'everybody-has-a-right-to-an-opinion' foxhole dig even deeper" (198)? In other words, would we simply become the same kind of authority we seek to teach our students to challenge and in so doing would we basically just promote an attitude of nihilistic apathy amongst our students who will walk out of our classes thinking critical thinking and listening won't matter because everyone is right as long as they are happy with their own answers? Let's look to improvisation and Viola Spolin for some answers.

Spolin would likely say the answer to both criticisms above (that of reification and that of creating nihilistic students) is in participation and not simply empty participation but the kind that "tricks" students into learning. What is interesting here is that actually mirrors Karen Kopelson's call for Metis in teaching from her article "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning; Or, The Performance of Neutrality (Re)Considered as Composition Pedagogy for Student Resistance." She defines Metis as a rhetorical technique that "willingly operates through reversal, deception, and disguise when necessary" (131). In Kopelson's case the Metis she argues for is of neutrality or "deliberate, reflective, self-conscious masquerade… in service of other – disturbing and disruptive – goals" (123). This is the same call Spolin makes in *Theater Games for the Classroom* when she says students must be "tripped into learning." She clarifies in *Improvisation for the Theater* by reminding teachers and side coaches to "Allow students to find their own material" as "Self-discovery is foundational to this way of working [improvisation]" and perhaps most directly, "Do not teach. Expose students to the theatrical environment through playing and they will find their own way" (41-42). This involves trusting your students which may sound completely the opposite of Metis, but the key here is what the deception being made is. That isn't always easy. Spolin acknowledges that leaving our past attitudes toward teaching is scary but advises "Never losing sight of the fact that *the needs of the theater are the real master* … Then the role of guide will be easily found by the teacher-director, who after all knows the theater technically and artistically, and whose experiences are needed in leading the group" (Improvisation…9). Both Spolin and Kopelson are arguing that the teacher must allow the students to find their own way by masquerading as a neutral figure. This doesn't necessarily mean lying to our students either. None of us are truly neutral about anything, so all an improvisational pedagogy asks us to do is not let our internal bias about what the right way to do something might be get in the way of our students' potential discoveries. The needs of the classroom must be our real master.

The teacher must utilize their experiences to find the best way to deal with what the student is facing in the moment and then guide the student in that direction. To do this we must "Work for equality" and "retreat from imposing authority" and this is possible when we "Allow the exercise to do the work," because "When the students feel they 'did it themselves,' the teacher has succeeded…" (Improvisation… 43). In this way the nihilistic student can take control of their own learning and see that they can have an impact on knowledge and their work does have meaning. That takes trust on our part, but in so doing we avoid lapsing into authoritarian teaching in this model as we give students the agency to discover on their own. In this model trust functions as a self-replicating entity. What I mean is when given the freedom to discover students will feel trusted and valued as any part of an improvisational group does and that will make them trust their teachers. This trust will then carry over to the next activity where students will already trust their teacher more than they did previously. According to Spolin "with focus on teaching/learning and not on personalities, all will tend to trust one another and allow selves and other to flourish (*Side coaching and Process).* Even if we are secretly positioning them for maximum potential discovery, they are still finding their own way to it and that cycle of best potential positioning on the part of the teacher and self-discovery on the part of the students can repeat and fortify itself in trust.

Whose Line is it Actually?

But what if students simply don't want to participate? The easy answer to this question is "Well, we're the teachers and they are the students so they have to participate for a grade" but that response clearly lapses back into authoritarian patterns. In *Theater Games for the Classroom* Spolin offers several solutions for students that do not want to participate. She advocates for "random counting off of teams" when selecting groups as it "throws players into the pool before they can resist (17). But if a student still resists they "should be kept within view of the playing so that the fear can be eased and eventual participation encouraged" (17). The teacher (as side coach) can even

take the initiative to call out "Help your fellow player who isn't playing! Never call out any player by name, however. The uncertainty as to just which player is not playing brings about group alertness" (17). The games and play inherit to them invite others to join in and the community focus of improvisational theater incentivize those already player to bring others into the play. Here, you can also take a more active role as teacher and "place students that are natural catalysts in positions where they can help spark activity" (16). Uncertainty creates fear and if a student is afraid of playing the games (though they may not say it in those words) it is up to the teacher and the community of those that are playing to find a place for that student in the playing. This can further provide agency as students can discover for themselves what role they want to play in the community. Maybe they are the one the invites others to play or maybe they are the one that sits back and waits for just the right moment to add something to the group. Not only do those that invite get the reward of having done their part to strengthen the community, but those invited gain agency when they realize that, on their own level, they too can contribute to the community of discovery around them.

Uncertain Curtain Call

Uncertainty will always exist in our classrooms. We can try to set up scaffolds by planning assignments that prepare students to come to class ready to make the point they see in the reading and then moving to the next student's point like a scattered anthology of ideas with no table of contents. Here, our students will learn to write or think for our (and their classmates) approval or disapproval, but not to engage with the experiences of others in ways that force them to rethink what has come before. Or, we can take the scaffolding down and promote trusting, listening, supporting and community engagement through games and activities based in Spolin's improvisational pedagogy. This work will not be easy and there is no script that can guarantee a Hollywood ending, but if we can learn to embrace that uncertainty for the potential discovery inherit

within it by utilizing improvisational techniques in our composition pedagogies, then I believe we can we can guide our students to self-identity and agency over their own learning process. This allows us to break away from authoritarian pedagogies and move closer toward a more democratic, multicultural, and intellectually curious conception of what our classroom communities can be. In this classroom group agreement and listening allow students to build off experiences of others and their own "Yes and…" one another from uncertainty into discovery.

4: INSIDE SIDE COACHING

For me, the ideal way to continue building knowledge in the classroom is to embrace Spolin's improvisational mindset for both students and teachers. Of course, bringing Spolin's techniques for the composition classroom will require teachers to get invested too. In doing so, we can access a pedagogy in which neither student nor teacher is the center of the class and instead discovery (in the form of critical thinking and learning) becomes the center of the classroom. If we can place knowledge creation at the center of the classroom, we can help create an environment in which what we do in the classroom resonates with students' lives outside of it. We must be willing to let go of some of the control mechanisms traditionally associated with teaching and incorporate the improvisational idea of the side coach into our composition pedagogies. And that's why I say we. The work starts with us. The work starts with teachers.

When teachers embrace the values of side coaching they achieve the goals of critical, culturally relevant and process pedagogies. For Spolin, side coaches facilitate learning by playing with students but also by keeping students on the focus and diagnosing the best methods to guide different students to solve problems posed in class. In this role, the teacher surrenders some authority (but not all) and the traditional role of teacher as gatekeeper of knowledge is challenged and interrogated as students take active control of their learning performance. In this chapter, I will argue that conceptualizing of teachers as side coaches as in Spolin's Improvisational Pedagogy fulfills the goals of Critical, Culturally Relevant, Process-based pedagogies. In addition, viewing teaching through the lens of the side coach provides teachers a model of feedback that moves students from what I'll call passive revision into active revision. The lens of performance is not a new one to look at teaching through and in this chapter, I will quickly trace out that history, but first I will explain how Spolin views the role of the side coach. Then, I will offer five key side coaching

phrases from Spolin's own glossary and demonstrate how these phrases and theories are a natural fit with the practices we already use in the composition classroom.

In *Theater Games for the Classroom* Spolin tells us "Side coaching is the calling out of just that word, that phrase, or that sentence that keeps the player on focus… Side coaching must guide players toward focus, creating interaction, movement, and transformation" (5). She encourages side coaches to "show, don't tell" (5) which paints the side coach more as the head facilitator than a gatekeeper of knowledge or as she writes of the side coach they are a "coaxing catalyst" (6). Side coaches are encouraged to play the games with students and take an active part in the discovery of knowledge. The side coach must carefully balance their role as facilitator and player though as Spolin illustrates saying "Side coaching should not alter the course of playing but simply strive to keep all players and the side coach, too, on focus" (6). Discovery is at the center of improvisational and it is the side coach's job to keep it there in a descriptive way. Prescription is discouraged as it is a memory of what came before and thus falls back into authoritarianism.

As Spolin warns in *Improvisation for the Theater* "Because it is a further method of keeping the student and teacher relating and must therefore be objective, great care must be taken to see that it does not disintegrate into an approval/disapproval involvement instead – a command to be obeyed" (29). Students need to be given the space to follow the side coach's direction in whatever way they want to try so that they remain the agent in charge of their own discovery and not forced to vie for teacher approval. The side coach "keeps the stage space alive for the student-actor" by not only "seeing the needs for the overall presentation" but also by "seeing the individual student-actor's needs within the group and on stage" and "working on the problem together with the student as part of the group effort" (29). For Spolin, the student and teacher work together to move towards

the focus. In order to understand how the side coach in Spolin's pedagogy compares with the teacher in composition pedagogies I'll briefly detail that history.

We Ain't Got No History

Jane Thompkins' landmark 1990 essay *Pedagogy of the Distressed* represents a call to action to abandon what she calls the "teacher performance model" (654) in favor of a more supportive approach she refers to as a "maternal or coaching" model (660). Here we see that even before the lens of improvisation, teachers were searching a model of teaching that relied less on control and more on facilitation. She wanted to move away from the "teacher performance model" in which teachers perform the role of teacher to as Thompkins says "a) to show the students how smart I was, b) to show them how knowledgeable I was, and to show them how well-prepared I was for class" (654). While the students' own ideas are considered in the "teacher performance" model, their goals and learning objectives are still only secondary to the knowledge which the teacher holds above all. Thompkins' goals, much like my own, were to move away from a rote learning model of education and towards something more conversational, more democratic, something more like Paulo Friere's. Moments of improvisation in the classroom are stamped out in favor of moments of pre-planned learning. The lesson is already known. Nothing new can come of it. This is essentially Friere's infamous concept of the "banking model' of education in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider know nothing" (72). So, instead of thinking critically at the time when we would most like them too (when their immediate world-view is threatened), our students simply appropriate what they think we want (or what they have already been told) because to them we are the keeper of knowledge while they are merely its passive recipient. For Friere, learning takes place in "action and reflection" which he calls Praxis (87). He proposes we use dialogue with others to create the world through our mutual

actions and reflections (88-89). This is radically different from a teacher centered model in which no dialoging can take place because all the answers already rest with the teacher.

In the teacher-centered or teacher performance model, there is no room for the students' dialogue. Knowledge is not built here, but rather passed down so that it cannot change, but only be reinforced. I want my students to be autonomous agents in the creation of knowledge just as Friere does, not to simply be appropriated by what has come before. Just like actors in an improvisational performance, both students and teachers must dialogue with each other utilizing action and reflection in order to build knowledge together. Improvisation provides a ready-made conduit through which that Praxis takes place.

Shady Cosgrove made the call to find ways to actively engage students in their own learning process this 2005 article "Teaching and Learning as Improvisational Performance in the Creative Writing Classroom" writing "The idea of performance, where the teacher is the performer, fails to take into account the active engagement of students… How often are audience members being encouraged to critically engage with the material being presented *during* the performance" (472). Thompkins, Cosgrove, and many others call for a move to the "maternal or coaching model" of teaching which gives students more responsibility to take an active role in their own learning and makes the teacher more of a facilitator of knowledge than a gatekeeper of it. I believe composition teachers can conceptualize teaching as side coaching like teacher of improvisational groups in order to become facilitators of our students' journeys to discovery.

This kind of pedagogy in which autonomy and active learning take center stage has become known as "student-centered pedagogy." In terms of the writing classroom, student-centered pedagogies "will not derive from a generalized model of composing, or be based on where the student ought to be because she is a freshman or sophomore, but will begin from where the student

is, and move where the student moves…" (North 439). So, if we are to be student-centered teachers, then we meet the students where they are at and move forward with them in their education when they are ready to move forward. Utilizing the tools already present in improvisation will allow us to move beyond student-centered pedagogies into a third space.

Student-centered pedagogies have certainly been shown to be empirically effective in increasing student self-efficacy in the composition classroom (Jones 233-34). So, the movement toward student centered pedagogies seems like an obvious fix to the problem of teacher as performer. However, Donna Kain complicates the student-centered model in her 2003 article "Teacher-Centered versus Student-Centered: Balancing Constraint and Theory in the Composition Classroom" in which she claims that often the merger of theory and reality we find in the classroom collapses the binary of student centered versus teacher centered pedagogies. She claims, "When we fail adequately to consider misalignments between our student's expectations and preparation and our own training, student-centered approaches can be no more effective than the teacher-centered approaches they are meant to replace" (106). We have a breakdown in communication here. Though we want to meet students where they are and proceed forward with them, our lack of training in how to do so can lead us back to a top-down approach in the classroom. Conceiving of the role of teacher more Spolin does a side coach, we can meet students where they are and move forward together to a model that is neither student or teacher centered, but rather, centered on discovery.

Third Space Blind

In the previous chapter I brought in research by Barbara Schapiro who also seeks to establish such a space where the course material and the processes used to analyze it are the driving force. In this "third space" classroom the focus is on the actual mental process of discovery through play in the classroom. I want to return to the same quote from the previous chapter and think about

it in terms of what it offers us as teachers. In "Negotiating a Third Space in the Classroom" Schapiro writes:

> The process of passionate critical inquiry, like the analytic process in the clinic, can create that third thing in the classroom in which both teacher and student surrender. From this perspective, the central dynamic in the classroom would then become a matter of surrendering to a process rather than asserting or relinquishing authority in relation to students. Neither the teacher's nor the student's voices need to be suppressed. From an intersubjective perspective, one can only find one's own voice in dialogue in relation to another's. (434)

In the third space described by Schapiro surrendering to discovery is at the center of the course. In Spolin's pedagogy the side coach maintains the focus of each game as the driving force of each class and I see no reason this model could not work in our classrooms. Schapiro is careful to point out that we must model this third space for our students, that we cannot simply hope for them to value critical inquiry as we do, but that we must "model for our students, finally, the struggle to inhabit that third space of intersubjectivity" (437). Spolin too is wary of this writing sometimes "games are seen by students as just another way to manipulate them into doing what the teacher wants them to do" (*Pay Attention*). This returns us to Kain's dilemma of student and teacher expectations not lining up which causes a breakdown in learning.

In the last chapter, I briefly touched upon the necessity for the teacher to pay attention and notice these moments and change the game being played or the players roles in the game, but not step in and tell the students what to do. In other words, the teacher must be descriptive rather than prescriptive when facilitating class. Even in the third space, the teacher is head facilitator and active

participant, not a keeper of knowledge.

Process

When I say Process based pedagogies I refer to those that "shift from a focus on the *product* of writing to its *process*" as Chris Anson writes in *Process Pedagogy and its Legacy* (215). Anson lists "Improvement of the learner, writing = more than sum of parts, student-centered, write to think, and socially dynamic effort" (216) as other characteristics of process pedagogy. Think of Spolin's definition of the side coach as a guide or catalyst in learning and compare it to how Anson describes the teacher in a process-based classroom "Instructionally, this resulted in a shift from the teacher as giver of knowledge to the student as active participant in the creation of knowledge (writing)" (218). Spolin says many times in her notes that "the side coach is a fellow player" (Side coaching Interviews). Despite not being an expert of Process pedagogy herself, Spolin was still able to conceptualize a teacher in line with the tenets of Process pedagogy.

Spolin was very clear about how improvisational pedagogy is based in process when interviewed for a profile piece saying about improvisational games saying "Process is the goal and the goal is endless process" (Lurie). In the chapter on Focus, I wrote at length on playing as learning in an improvisational pedagogy, but I want to briefly return to that notion here. Spolin ties all of these ideas and explains their function when she writes:

> A side coach like the players must learn to be in the process of playing… in the heart of the playing. He is simply the extra eye, the extra antennae who helps, guides, prods the players into greater efforts, keeps them playing (process) when they have lost their way. If the side coach becomes the 'Teacher' or 'Director' and tries to get an end result without players in process he is worthless. (Side coaching Interviews).

The side coach is the most important figure in keeping the process of discovery going, but not a taskmaster determined to make workers pass what is already known down an assembly line. This emphasis on side coaches as facilitators of process and fellow players rather than as someone that passes down the ready-made product of knowledge clearly positions them as advocates of process pedagogy. The side coach does not push students to answer questions in a certain way but "into greater effort" and "keeps them playing when they have lost their way." Really, the side coach capitalizes on their knowledge and experience and sees to it the process of play and discovery continues.

Let's Get Critical

Side coaches in Spolin's improvisational pedagogy put the liberatory pedagogy of Paulo Friere and Ira Shor into practice as well. As Friere points out in *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* "Without authority it is very difficult for the liberties of the students to be shaped. Freedom needs authority to become free. It is a paradox but it is true" (91). But the side coach can play both the role of an authority and of one that allows students the space to autonomously discover and create based in their own experiences instead of those passed down by those that came before. Spolin makes it clear over and over in her notes that a side coach should be a fellow player saying "Think of yourself as leader of the group rather than teacher. A leader is part of a group. Part of a whole" and even more clearly "A side coach like the player must always be in the process of the playing" (Side coaching Interviews). The side coach does not take control, but keeps students moving on the course (pun intended) towards discovery.

To me, the side coach is the embodiment of what Friere is getting at when he says "I have to be radically democratic and responsible and directive. *Not* directive of the *students*, but directive of the *process*" (46). This is how the side coach operates in an improvisational pedagogy. Spolin makes

this connection clear when she tells us "The side coach must not seek power or control but should become the detached mind of the body (group)…" (*Side coaching Interviews*). I'll return to the idea of detachment as an educational strategy later in this chapter, but for now it is important to know that the side coach does not seek power or control in Spolin's pedagogy. To Spolin, if the side coach "tries to get an end result, he is worthless" (*Side coaching Interviews*). Viewing the teacher through the improvisational lens of the side coach clearly has the potential to attempt to rectify the paradox of the role of authority in freedom.

Improvisation as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Side coaches in Spolin's improvisational pedagogy also practice Culturally Relevant Pedagogies as defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings in "The (R)Evolution Will Not Be Standardized: Teacher Education, Hip Hop Pedagogy, and Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0." Ladson-Billings tells us the three major components of CRPs are "(a) a focus on student learning, (b) developing students' cultural competence, and (c) supporting their critical consciousness" (142). All of these components can be found in an improvisational pedagogy and it is the unique role of the side coach that facilitates them. Spolin tells us "all Side Coaching is determined out of what is happening (emerging out of the playing) so as to assist players in seeing new plays" (*Side coaching Interviews*). It is not the role of the side coach to decide how a problem will be solved, but only to help students continue to keep trying to solve the problem so that they organically learn instead of being told prescriptively what to do. In this way, student discovery is the purview of the side coach rather than rote teaching.

Side coaches are also positioned to develop students' cultural competence in unique ways from other, traditional conceptions of the teacher. Spolin clarifies how this works in *Improvisation For the Theater* writing "If student and teacher are freed from ritual and authoritarianism and allowed to

share this freeing of their creativity. No one need dissect and examine their emotions. They will know that there are many ways of expressing something – that cups, for instance, are held differently by different people and different groups" (40-41). There is no correct way to hold a cup. There is no judgement or right and wrong in improvisation. The side coach and the students actively suspend judgement in order to discover new things together through improvisation. Improvisation can give students windows into cultural experiences that they may otherwise never have and since improvisation only seeks to solve problems as a group, there is no reason to judge or demean one way of solving a problem. When a side coach leads students from different socio-cultural identities to solve problems together, everyone learns the value in different perspectives.

Side coaches in an improvisational pedagogy can also support students' critical consciousness as well. Side coaching is again unique in this respect as it allows students to be side coaches as well as the teacher. Spolin is clear that "some theater games may be too sophisticated or require some theatrical experience, etc…, to be useful to a student side coach" though (Side coaching Interviews). So, the side coach must use their experience teaching and knowledge of the subject matter to decide when and where to let students take the role of side coach. This puts the student directly into the role of the authority which challenges traditional power structures and allows students unique insight into these roles. The ability to then return to playing allows for students to bring that experience of leading into the games and thus interrogate it through play with the group.

Interrogating and experiencing power structures through play is unique to improvisational pedagogy and should be practiced in more classrooms. As Ladson-Billings writes "The student that moves from non- or limited participation in a group to leadership and fill participation has learned something not evident on a standardized test but important for further school and life success"

(143). The student that takes on a leadership role is positioned to be more critical of others in leadership roles by virtue of having experience that students don't get by learning formulas and taking tests. Any student with experience in an improvisational pedagogy has experience with being critically conscious in ways that simply cannot be replicated by tests and rote teaching.

They Took Our Jobs!

Doubtlessly some may be thinking something along these lines at this point: "This all sounds great, but doesn't this diminish my role as a teacher?" The simple answer is yes, but we can do better than simple answers here. Of course, you will have to surrender some responsibility to students when playing games or doing improvisation inspired exercises. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter though, this surrendering of responsibility gives students the space to take autonomy over their own learning process. Not only that, but Spolin challenges the notion of the diminished role of the teacher as less involved and instead tells us to "detach to create greater involvement by all" (Side coaching Interviews). The side coaching teacher acts as an impartial observer and guides students toward discovery by calling out that phrase or word that keeps them focused on problem solving but never gives them the answers.

Spolin tell us that the side coach is a fellow player but that is not their only role. In addition to being a fellow player when necessary, the side coach must also observe each student and diagnose the most appropriate method of dealing with whatever struggle that student is experiencing. Spolin tell teachers:

> You are in a constant state or learning yourself. You don't learn from the student, the moment you are learning you are teaching. The moment the student is learning, he is teaching. In other words, he is revealing himself and others something he sees or is seeing.

> The moment I am in learning I am teaching. Otherwise it is all rote and information. Computers would be more effective than many teachers. (Teacher/Student Interviews).

So, as a side coach, it is imperative that we see what students reveal to us as they grapple with the exercise and adjust our methods in a way that helps that student. A good side coach doesn't simply tell students what they are doing wrong here though, but rather uses moments such as this to guide students to continue solving the problem (staying on Focus) in other ways. As Spolin writes in one of my personal favorite sections of her notes titled *Words to Wise Teachers* "Give the student what he seeks and needs, not what the curriculum sets forth" (*Education Handbook*). Teachers in an improvisational pedagogy don't simply do improvisation by joining games but by constantly adapting their own practices to the Kairotic moment.

As Spolin advises side coaches in *Improvisation for The Theater* "Be flexible, Alter your plans at a moment's notice if it is advisable to do so, for when the foundation upon which this work is based is understood and your know your role as teacher, you can find an appropriate theater game and/or games to meet an immediate problem" (38). In this way our students teach us to be better teachers and we in turn teach them to become better learners. And that's tough. As Spolin writes in *Improvisation for the Theater* "To evolve problems that solve problems requires a person with rich knowledge of the field" (42). In order to do the kind of teaching/side coaching that Spolin advocates for a teacher must be well versed in the subject they are teaching and have some experience with different methods of teaching it. Rather than diminish the role of the teacher to player, it is quite clear that an improvisational pedagogy asks the teacher to use what they already know to guide their students beyond that to new discoveries.

If anything, I think it could be better argued that a teacher in an improvisational pedagogy has a larger role than that of a teacher that teaches from a detailed, meticulous, unchanging plan as

the side coach must ready for whatever may happen in class that day while the teacher with a script simply needs to read back what they already know. Spolin pulls no punches on the matter writing in her notes that "The moment I am in learning I am teaching. Otherwise it is all rote and information…computers would be more effective than many teachers are" (*Contrapuntal Argument).* If you need to know times and dates or grammar rules and punctuation a simple Google search can answer those questions, but to build from experience to discovery takes human beings constantly engaged in a dialectic of teaching and learning. In *Improvisation for The Theater* Spolin writes "Technical facts about the theater are available to everyone through many books. We seek far more than information about the theater" (42). I believe the same is true in my composition classroom. There are dozens of writing handbooks easily available to anyone. I want to help my students adapt their writing and thinking to the complex, dynamic situations they will face outside of my classroom not simply understand where to put commas and when to use a semi-colon. Like Spolin, I want my students to be able to think critically when asked to do a task they are unfamiliar with and utilize what they do know to come up with a solution to their problem. While no teacher can educate students for every circumstance that they will encounter after they leave the classroom, utilizing an improvisational pedagogy, we can educate them to be ready to adapt when something unfamiliar is presented to them.

If, for example, a student of mine is asked to write a memo to their boss after they graduate and join the workforce but we never went over memos, that student could still build off of experiences we had in activities to devise a business memo. If the same happened to a student that had never encountered business memos in a more rote course they might panic because they never learned about this concept. This could be a crisis of self-doubt for that student as they had only been taught to find knowledge from "smarter" people in a more authoritarian model. Paralyzed by fear, that student might never even write the memo for fear of being "wrong." Even if none of the

experiences in my class had prepared my student for this, they would still have been primed (through games and exercise) to seek out the perspectives of others. Rather than get caught up in the shame and fear associated with being "wrong," one trained in a more improvisational pedagogy would listen, adapt, and discover a way to create something they previously did not know. They could do this by asking other employees or even follow up with the person asking them to write the memo (with fear of being "wrong" removed these tasks are much less intimidating). Rather than being trapped in fear and self-doubt and being unable to act, students in an improvisational pedagogy have experience in what Spolin calls "joyous crisis" (*Change*) so they can build on that experience to solve problems just as we did in class when we played games and did improvisational exercises.

Do I Have Lines in This Scene?

Above is sort of a vague outline of how a side coach could prepare a student for all of that which we do not have time to teach during the semester we spend with our students. But how do we teach them what we want to? What do we say? If side coaching is calling out just that phrase that keeps players focused on the game, well… what is "that phrase?" While it would be pedagogically inconsistent for Spolin to have left us with exactly what to say in any given situation, she did offer advice and even some helpful phrases to help a side coach find their footing.

In *Improvisation for Theater* Spolin includes a glossary of phrases for the side coach and here I'll look at a few of them as well as her preface to that short glossary in order to determine just what phrases we might start with in the composition classroom. Since the preface is so short, I've reproduced it all here in order to 1) keep everything in her words and 2) demonstrate how she instructs without prescribing. Spolin writes that "All side coaching is given during playing and rehearsals. Actors do not stop to consider what is being side coached. They *act*! When side coaching

begins to work for you and your cast, it is rarely realized as theatrical directing; a symbiotic connection results. Side coaching excites to action and hurtles everyone into the present (374)." This is all of the direction she gives to side coaches in the beginning of this section. Just as in one of her exercises, she gives a focus (in this case exciting action and keeping actors present) and turns the players lose to play though she does give us some phrases to play with. In order to demonstrate how I envision side coaches working in the composition classroom, I will examine five of the key phrases in depth here.

The first phrase I want to look at here is "Allow the focus to work for you" (374). Spolin tells us that this phrase should relax the player and remind them that they can use the outside force they are working for (the focus) to their own advantage. Think of times students get frustrated during activities and give up. I can think of times I've had students doing group activities and they respond with "we tried X, Y, and Z, but this is impossible!" Here you can remind them to let the focus work for them. What is unique about the problem at hand? Could that unique problem become an asset? I have students look at advertisements early in the semester when we learn ethos, pathos, and logos in freshman composition in order to demonstrate that they can identify concepts and their effects and to show that their definitions can be flexible. Sometimes students will say "its not possible, this is all emotion, there is not logos here!" Here, establishing the focus as "identify the usage of the modes of persuasion in the following advertisement" and then telling the student that says it is impossible because there's no logos that they should "Allow the focus to work for you" can remind that student (without telling them they are wrong) that the problem to be solved is not to find the instances of logos in the advertisement but to identify the usage of these persuasive methods. Then the student can return to the work without discouragement and with an idea of where to start working (rethinking the focus).

Another side coaching phrase we could benefit from in the composition classroom is "Help your fellow player that isn't playing" (375). Though this phrase is pretty self-explanatory in terms of its meaning, it is the way it achieves that meaning I think is crucial to the composition classroom. We are not reverting to authoritarian methods here even though we are giving a command. First of all we never call out those that are not performing by name as it keeps from shaming any individual but also keeps the group alert as they must all be aware of who is and isn't playing. This can easily translate to group exercises and activities. Even if students all seem to be participating a side coach can issue this command and watch as students begin to try to include others they had previously ignored or that were nervous about participating. This phrase is also crucial because of what it can do for group discussion. I like to have moments of discussion in my classes. If you do too, you probably have a few students that always speak and a few that never speak.

During these discussions, issue the command "help your fellow player that isn't playing." If a student is taking up a large part of the conversation maybe they decide to sit back and listen or maybe that student uses the experience of being in class and playing and learning with their fellow student to make a short remark that invites them into the conversation. For example, maybe you are discussing an essay on concussions in football (in freshman comp! no way!) and one student that loves football has been talking a lot but you say to "help your fellow player that isn't playing." If this student has been playing and learning with other students during the semester they can think back on a time when a fellow student revealed their mother or father worked as a doctor. Then, the student can say something like "that's just my view as a fan though. I know there's the whole healthcare side of it too." Then the student with knowledge of that from their own experience is invited into the conversation. You don't have to tell the over-talker to quiet down (potentially embarrassing them) and you don't have to call out the silent student (potentially embarrassing them) but you can call out that as a group we should all be helping each other. Here, both students are able

to check themselves and those around them without the fear of disapproval that lead to authoritarianism.

An important phrase to encourage active participation is "Out of your head, into the space" (375). Spolin notes on this phrase are "Useful to get rid of attitudes. Players move out into the stage space. Frees the intuition" (375). We want to get students interacting with each other's work. Think of peer editing sessions where the same students choose the same partners over and over again. To encourage students to communicate with more than just those they already know we can use phrase like this to push them without forcing them into predetermined groups stripping them of their authority. Just as it can be used to increase ideological movement, his phrase can be used during games to increase physical movement. If students don't participate in some way in games then they aren't going to be part of the classroom community in the same way as those that do participate. Encouraging players to move and not get stuck in analysis of what has come before is one of the first steps into showing students the value of taking a risk and embracing uncertainty while playing a game so that they may then take that comfort level with the unknown into group projects or papers.

The phrase "Reflect, don't initiate!" is one I have actually heard while performing improvisation myself (376). Spolin's notes on this phrase are "To reflect is to include another; to initiate is to deny yourself" (376). I heard this phrase from my own side coach when playing a game called "Photo Album." In this game one player is narrating a trip they took while pretending to click through a slideshow of photos. The other players (3-5 in my experience) pose for these pictures when the player showing off the pictures makes the clicking sound of the slide changing. This game is supposed to facilitate listening and teamwork but I had lost the focus and needed to be reminded by my side coach. Instead of working with my fellow players to create scenes which we all had input on, I was starting off in motion quickly initiating what I though the scene should be. My side coach

said for me to "Reflect, don't initiate" and so I waited for someone else on my team to move before starting the next few slides. As we moved onto different scenes I could feel myself being pushed to try different poses than I was comfortable with and I was listening and watching much more intently to see how I could support what my teammates were doing on stage. This makes me think of times where a student takes a leadership role in a group and, perhaps not even knowingly, stifles other group members by taking over. Here the command is not "Let other people do things" but rather to sit back and be part of the team. Reflecting encourages active listening as in order to reflect what your fellow players are doing, you must listen to both their words and their bodies. Not initiating allows for different experiences to guide each game/lesson and pushes students outside of their own comfort zones to try new things or even to try to reflect and understand what others are trying.

The fifth key phrase for side coaches for me is the most important and it is "You name it!" (376). Here Spolin advocates that you find your own side coaching phrases and I know it may seem a bit hokey to even add this toa list of five key phrases, but it is so crucial to any side coach that they embody improvisation and remain attentive to the moment and adaptable. The key is to use phrases like Spolin's that do not command, but inspire. Don't seek to tell your students exactly how to do something, but instead find a way to describe what you want to see from them and trust that they will work to discover their own way of achieving that focus.

A side coach allows students to solve their own problem which in turn makes them feel more prepared to solve the next problem. The goal then is to not only keep the students in the present solving problems but to show them that they have the power to solve those problems without the traditional teacher standing over them correcting them. So, then it is natural that eventually students become side coaches as the class progresses and none of this diminishes the role of the teacher. The teacher is still the guide and the doctor that both diagnoses problems and leads

students to solve those problems without prescribing a solution or directing students to the end. Side coaching isn't just powerful in the way it theoretically informs a teacher's approach to communication, but it can also be very practically useful in processes such as revision.

Side Revising

I think side coaching can offer a some very interesting insights into how we help students work through the process of writing, namely in how we help them revise. In her article "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" Nancy Sommers argues writing has long been through of linearly which reduces the act of revision to a mere afterthought as it comes after the writing product is completed (379). Because of this she claims "It is a sense of writing as discovery – a repeated process of beginning over again, starting out new – that students failed to have" (387). However, in analyzing the revision strategies of experienced writers she claims experienced writers…seek to discover (to create) meaning in the engagement with their writing, in revision" (386). Utilizing the techniques of improvisation, a side coach can help students to see revision this way.

Sommers tells us that inexperienced writing students predominant concern in revision is "vocabulary… The students understand the revision process as a rewording activity" and she goes on to say that students "believe that most problems in their essays can be solved by rewording" (381). She describes this is merely translating. Students are merely repeating someone else's message in different words. She warns "Whatever is translated, an original text already exists for students, one which need not be discovered or acted upon, but simply communicated" (381). In this way the inexperienced student writer is acted upon by what has come before and has no authority to try to say something different. Approval of language is all that matters and when a teacher disapproves the language must simply be changed to fit that teacher's preconceived notions. Sommers claims this

model blinds students to the possibility of revision as actually "re-seeing" writing students are unable to " 're-view' their work again, as it were, with different eyes, and to start over" (382). This is because for Sommers these students lack "a set of strategies to help them identify the "something larger" that they sensed was wrong and work from there. These students do not have strategies for handling the whole essay" (383). This is where improvisation comes into play for me.

One of the most fun and illuminating improvisational games I've ever played is called simply "Should Have Said." This game seems to have evolved from Spolin's "Stage Whispers" which she describes in *Improvisation for Theater* as a game in which players suggest phrases to one another in a circle and must then repeat those phrases for the audience (394). In "Should Have Said" there are players on stage in a scene usually determined by audience members, but this could easily just be done by classmates not participating in said scene if we were to move this to a classroom setting. Those not in the scene have free reign to say "should have said" to the actors at any point in the scene and they can repeat it over and over again. When I first played this game the advice I received from my side coach was "first go with something opposite of what has been said, then go with something fun and then go with something vulnerable" and I've always loved that advice. In this way the actor told to revise their line has to really explore the meaning of what they are saying and why they are saying it. Here is a brief, simulated round of "Should Have Said" to illustrate what I mean:

Actor: I like snacks!

Audience: Should have said!

Actor: I hate snacks!

Audience: Should have said!

Actor: My favorite snack is apples dipped in peanut butter

Audience: Should have said!

Actor: Snacks make me miss snack time with my Grandmother before she passed away

Here we can see how the actor is being pressed by the audience until they get to something specific and real and meaningful. The idea of "Should Have Said" is not to get actors to try new vocabulary words but to make them explore ideas and dig deeper into surface level thoughts. Often the fun in this game for the audience is watching the actor stumble a bit which causes a laugh but this can quickly become heartfelt and touching when that actor is pressed to a place of honest vulnerability.

Sommers solutions for the inexperienced writer that struggles with revision function very similarly to "Should Have Said." She says that experienced writers "imagine a reader (reading their product) whose existence and whose expectations influence their revision process" (385) To me, this is just like imagining the audience saying "Should Have Said" instead of imagining a teacher saying "must say." She claims these experienced writers "use and manipulate the conventions of discourse in order to communicate to their reader. But these revisions strategies are more than a process of communication; they are part of the process of *discovering meaning together"* (385). Here the audience and the actor discover together that snacks really reminded the actor of a time when their grandmother made them snacks. The student and the side coach discover meaning together when the side coach steps back from directly prescribing solutions to writing problems and instead describes what they are seeing while giving the writer the space to discover what it is they may not have said on the page yet. The cyclical process of "Should Have Said" also answers Sommers own call to bring discovery into writing through "a repeated process of beginning over again, starting out new" (387). "Should Have Said" is a great game to play to get students used to the idea of revision as re-seeing and not simply plugging in new vocabulary words or grammatical conventions.

Sommers tells us "Good writing disturbs: it creates dissonance. Students need to seek the dissonance of discovery..." (387). Utilizing games like "Should Have Said" in class and carrying that same side coach mentality into the way we respond to student writing and revision allows our students to see the dissonance of discovery as the joyous crisis that Spolin seeks to put students into with her games.

I'll Have a Side of Coaching Please

Side coaches are unique in the teaching world. They participate and learn with students, but they also balance their use of authority and experience to guide students to solve problems on their own terms. When a side coach is facilitating a group of students it is possible for that group to critically interrogate power structures, learn to be culturally responsible and view learning as a constant process of adaptation. Though it requires teachers to step back in some ways, side coaching allows students to step forward and take control of their learning in ways that remain relevant to them long after they leave the confines of our classrooms. The role of teacher has seen many permutations over the years and doubtlessly will change again, but the conception of teacher as side coach provides us with a theoretical lens from which can view the role of teacher as the expert guide and problem solver rather than gatekeeper of knowledge. Together, like a group of improvisers and their side coach, we can guide our students to discover new knowledge and solve problems in new ways to move past rote teaching to a more robust, adaptive knowledge with resonance in all facets of their lives.

5: WHAT'S YOUR SCORED? UTILIZING IMPROVISATIONAL PEDAGOGY FOR ASSESSMENT

When we think of what Improvisational theater might offer the composition classroom, assessment may not jump out as one of the most natural areas of confluence. However, Spolin put a great emphasis on the way assessment is done in her Improvisational classes. Of course, being an academic discipline, composition has always dealt with some sort of assessment as well. Speaking historically, validity and reliability have always been conundrums for those trying to design the most robust, democratic assessment technologies. Speaking more contemporarily, these problems are manifest as composition as a discipline has tried to account for the voices that have traditionally been held back from academic conversation due to factors such as (but not limited to) race, gender, economic standing and sexual orientation and the many intersections of all of these.

As we continue to open up the academic conversation to more and voices, we can utilize the Improvisational pedagogy of Viola Spolin to cultivate assessment technologies that are more democratic and place more value on the individual identity of each student that steps into our classrooms. Simply put, Viola Spolin's theory of assessment in improvisation can help those of us teaching in the composition classroom conceptualize new ways to answer Asao Inoue's call in his 2019 Conference on College Composition and Communication opening statement to "stop justifying White standards of writing as a necessary evil" (364). Assessment for Spolin is dialectical as the one assessing the student must listen and observe that student as an individual and work with them to best meet their needs and not the needs of any particular hierarchy.

To get started, I'll situate my argument with a brief timeline of writing assessment inspired by Brian Huot, Peggy O'Neill, and Cindy Moore's excellent assessment of writing assessment form their article "A Usable Past for Writing Assessment." Here, I'll show how, as Kathleen Blake Yancey

tells us in "Looking Back as We Look Forward: Historicizing Writing Assessment" assessment in the discipline of composition has moved "in overlapping waves, with one wave feeding into another but without completely displacing waves that came before" (483) and make the case that we have arrived in a new wave. Using these histories as a foundation, I will use the work of Maya Wilson, Peter Elbow, Pat Bellanoff, and Jane Danielewicz to examine some of the most common contemporary ways of thinking outside of the traditional standardized assessment. Next, I will bring in the work of Asao Inoue and Maya Poe to explain how these assessment technologies, though valiant efforts, fall short of being the as fair as possible. Finally, I will demonstrate that Viola Spolin's theories of assessment in improvisation can be translated into useful tools for the composition classroom that account for the needs of individual being educated instead of reifying old codes and models. Particularly, I will utilize Spolin's improvisational game "What's Your Score?" in tandem with contract grading theory from composition pedagogies to propose the Self-Scoring contract as a new assessment technology. In so doing, we can start to better answer Inoue's call in "Writing Assessment as an Antiracist Practice" to "pay attention to and be critical of the objects of assessment" and devise assessment technologies that are "mutually defined by both student and teacher, ones that critique, ones that stop measuring students and start understanding them and their languaging" (378-379). If our goals are to assess in the most fair, least authoritarian way, then Spolin's improvisational assessment can offer us some new ways to reach for these goals.

A More Efficient History

First, let's examine the fairly short, but complicated history of writing assessment. Huot et al mark the Harvard Entrance Exam in 1874 as the switch from oral to written exam assessment in composition. The method for assessing these tests stems from intelligence testing that had already been in place for years and unfortunately brings with it many of the same tensions. One major

tension here is that between reliability and validity in assessment. In assessment *reliability* refers to the ability of two or more scorers ability to come out with similar scores for the same piece of writing, (495-6). In these terms, *validity* refers to correlation of scores with what the test was intended to measure (503-04). Throughout the history of assessment reliability has long been the guiding principle with validity largely assumed because often the only check for validity was if a valid authority had designed then testing apparatus. In fact, scholarship on validity doesn't being to emerge on a rigorous level until the 1920's (503). So, the major principle guiding the assessment of early (and many contemporary) writing assessment technologies was whether or not interreader reliability, or the ability of two scorers to score writing the same, could be achieved. Efficiency was the name of the game here as most colleges were looking for a reliable, fairly speedy way to assess the writing abilities of would-be and current students through tests that could be evaluated with minimal effort on part of those doing the evaluating.

According to Huot, a major problem in early writing assessments technologies was interreader reliability though (499). This continues to rear its head in more contemporary discussion of assessment technologies as well illustrating Yancey's concept of assessment in the discipline traveling in waves. In *Looking Back as We Look Forward: Historicizing Writing Assessment* Kathleen Blake Yancey breaks writing assessment into three waves writing that "During the first wave (1950-1970), writing assessment took the form objective tests; during the second (1970-1986), it took the form of holistically scored essay; and during the current wave, the third (1986-present), it has taken the form of portfolio assessment and of programmatic assessment." She tells us these waves "overlap" and so even as a new wave forms on the horizon, it is composed of parts of the wave that recedes. So, even though reliability and validity have taken a backseat in more contemporary assessment, they do still play a role. Both Yancey and Huot give rich, detailed histories of assessment in composition's first three waves but for the purposes of this project I will investigate what Yancey calls the current wave

to see how we might amend practices such as portfolio grading and to determine if perhaps contract grading and improvisational assessment might be part of a fourth wave of assessment in composition.

For this study, I borrow the term "assessment technologies" from Inoue and Poe's collection *Race and Writing Assessment* because "Conceiving of assessment as a technology allows us to always acknowledge explicitly the shaping effects that various racial, socioeconomic, gender and other sociocultural and sociopolitical formations have on any writing assessment, even when we make decisions from our assessment outcomes without any consideration of the racial identity"(4). (why is this collection important? What's the impetus?) I prefer this term as it injects the human element into assessment which is also a key theme of Viola Spolin's own work. This is crucial because though analytic grading of standardized tests may be more objective and that may seem more desirable, it also assumes humans are objects, not subjects with complex identities, a problem which is further complicated by the work of Inoue and Poe. By utilizing improvisational assessment pedagogy, I believe we can move further away from sterile, assembly line like assessment technologies and toward more just, wide-reaching ones.

Moving Past the Assembly Line

In 1980 Anne Gere furthered the charge for more human-based assessment when she claimed writing instruction had focused too much on establishing that it could viably assess student writing and not enough on the theory behind it (503). Since these compositionists (in the 1980's) were relying on out-dated theory (still using 30's theory when things had changed in the 50's) there was a disconnect between composition assessment and the educational measurement community (503). A couple of different solutions came along for this problem. One was to strip the human element out of assessment almost entirely. By the 1990's computer programs were claimed to be

able to assess student writing more reliably than humans (502). Now, writing scholars could get to studying theory and computers could do all the grunt work of actual assessment. However, computer assessment completely divorced composition assessment from the human element of those being assessed. Later portfolio grading would challenge these programs claiming that to truly establish reliability the particular usage (context) of the data must be taken into consideration (503).

Portfolio grading attempted to bring context of the writing being evaluated to the fore. The portfolio, pioneered by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff is succulently explained in "Portfolios as a Substitute for Proficiency Examinations,":

> Every 101 student must now develop-out of all the writing done during the semester-a portfolio of three revised papers: (a) a narrative, descriptive, or expressive piece; (b) an essay of any sort (so long as it is in the discourse of the academic community-i.e., not a personal, digressive, essai as by Montaigne); (c) an analysis of a prose text. With each of these papers students must submit a brief informal cover sheet which explores their writing process in that paper and acknowledges any help they have received. The portfolio must also contain a fourth piece: an in-class essay done without benefit of feedback. (336).

Some of the stated goals of the portfolio are to: give a "valid picture of a student's proficiency in writing" (336), to "ask for *better* writing and push *more* students to provide it" by giving them "more time and chance for help, and by letting them choose their best writing" (337) and also to promote "collaboration" work against "isolation" (338). Here, those assessing writing look at how the writer works in several contexts and the writer is given the authority over their own writing. The writer is given the opportunity to collaborate with their teacher about the nature of writing being assessed and teachers are encouraged to collaborate over the grading being done. Portfolios marked an

important step forward for those hoping to assess writing and writers more fairly, but they were not without their drawbacks.

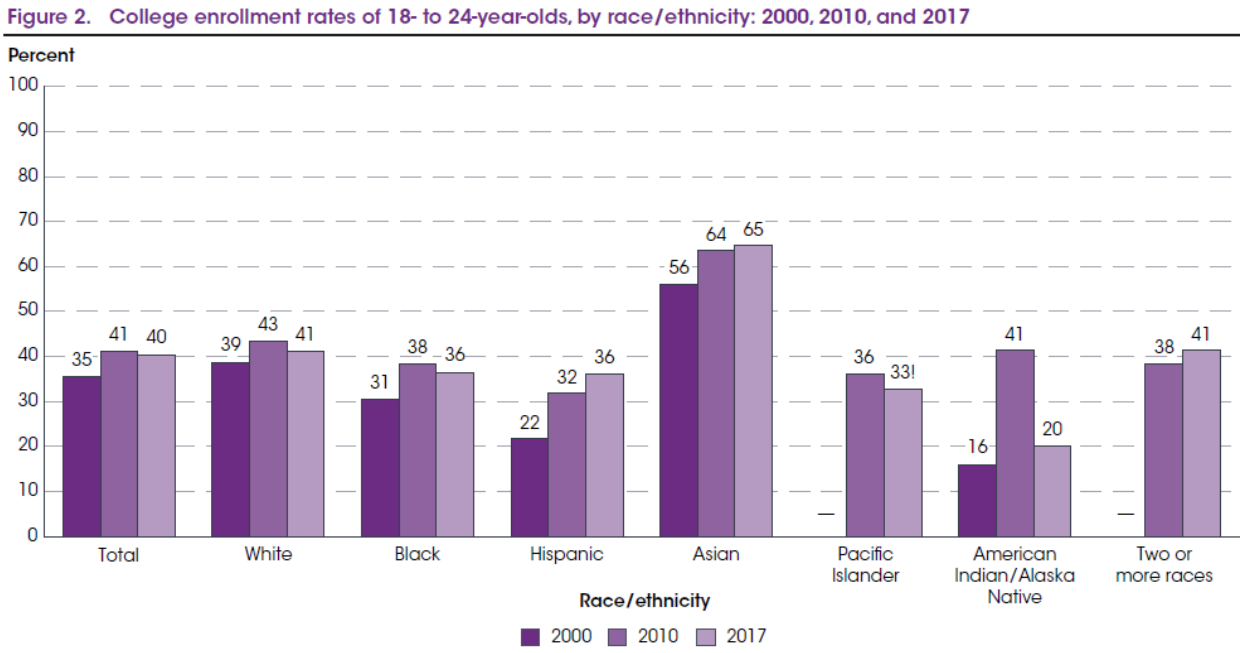
Yancey identifies three key theoretical factors that complicate portfolio grading as "(1) the nature of reading processes and their relationship to assessment; (2) the role of scoring procedures in an assessment; and (3) what writing assessments can teach us when they are located in" all of which essentially culminate in the question "portfolios should be read: but how?" (493). Sure, the collaborative assessment technology of the portfolio provides the chance for student autonomy over contextually determined writing(what does this mean?), but how do we as teachers grade this format in a way that doesn't reify our own preferences as the correct way to write? Are we really breaking the approval/disapproval model of assessment and education in the composition classroom with the portfolio model?

Complicating Fairness

According to Diane Kelly-Riley in her article "Getting off the Boat and onto the Bank: Exploring the Validity of Shared Evaluation Methods for Students of Color in College Writing Assessment" portfolio grading is just one example of shared evaluation methodology or "practices in which local context drives the articulation of assessment standards" (29). These practices came into focus in the 1980's and their goal is "articulation and application of standards by a community that attempts to connect context-rich assessment to the complexity of the classroom experience, faculty practice and the learning environment" (30). Methods of shared evaluation include peer editing, impromptu essays, and self-analysis. Though these methods can be utilized in other assessment methodologies, the criteria for shared evaluation is always derived locally from the context of a specific learning situation (30). While all of this sounds like assessment was taking some major steps forward in terms of accounting for students' individual identities, this kind of grading

was it was not without its problems. There is a noticeable lack of any mention of students' race, economic standing, gender or identity in the previous history of assessment. Those doing the assessing (and the theorizing about it) have largely ignored all of these factors. In "Black Holes: Writing Across the Curriculum, Assessment, and the Gravitational Invisibility of Race" Chris Anson notes even scholarship in the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, a movement founded on "student-centeredness and a focus on discipline-based courses as communities of learning where writing could play a role" has left these factors invisible (15-20). Though scholars such as Villanueva, Inoue, and Delpit have approached these issues head-on, they are unfortunately not in the majority.

If Anson is correct about WAC scholarships lack of attention to the identities of students, then administrators of assessments aren't considering these factors either, and it's a safe (although morally troublesome) bet that the teachers they administrate aren't considering the identities of the students they are assessing on a large scale either. This is made more troubling when we look at the United States Department of Education's education report for 2019 written by McFarland et al. The USDE's report features numbers on college enrollment from 2000 to 2017. During these years Black students enrolled in college increased by five percent (from 31% to 36%), Asian students enrolled increased by nine percent (from 56% to 65%), and Hispanic students enrolled increased by fourteen percent (from 22% to 36%). Combine these numbers with the fact that while white students enrolled increased by two percent over the same time (from 39% to 41%) these students actually decreased from 43% to 41% over the larger 2010- 2017 timeframe and we can see that assessment scholarship needs to pay more attention to the diverse identities of the students being assessed (150-152).



Graphic reproduction of the USDE figures on college enrollment (Mcfarland et al., *The Condition*)

None of this is to say that race is the only factor that should be considered in assessment, but as Maya Poe and Asao B. Inoue note in their introduction "Certainly issues such as gender and socioeconomic status work in tandem with race…" (2) so, if we can hypothesize methods to consider the racial identities of the students we are assessing, then we can no doubt do the same for the other facets of their complex identities as individuals.

Improvising A Way Forward

Spolin would see almost all of the assessment technologies listed above as following what she calls the approval/disapproval model. Spolin even calls approval/disapproval and reward/punishment two sides of the same coin in her notes and she claims that this kind of system will "not automatically develop a moral individual" and in fact runs the risk of developing an "amoral character" or "the one who only seeks to escape the consequences of his/her act or to be left alone" (Spolin, *July 2, 1973*). Essentially, we are not assessing individuals on whether they become critical thinkers and problem solvers capable of working together to find solutions to

problems in their worlds, but rather, on how well they stay out of trouble and don't deviate from the status quo. Here, think of operant conditioning where reward and punishment drive an individual to "learn." After the brief history of assessment above, I don't believe it is a stretch to say much of assessment today either stems from or is still very directly a form of this kind of approval/disapproval model that Spolin derides. For all of the good it tried to do, the third wave of assessment and the portfolios that came with it still only reify what the teachers see as quality writing. Good grades are an approval of student performance while bad ones disapprove their performance and uphold the status quo.

For someone not involved in any of the assessment scholarship in the 80's Spolin is also very keen to point to this problem in her own work stating in her notes that "Approval/disapproval attempts to create sameness… the same gravy over everything as it were and thereby denies individual uniqueness – and individual differences" (*Approval/Disapproval/Authority*). This is exactly what happens in assessment methodologies like shared evaluation even with the best of intentions. The individual becomes conditioned to be more concerned about being "right" or "correct" and less concerned about their own identity or, as Spolin says in her notes, this model is "crippling of the individuals within a community and distortion of that community's values as a result" (*July 2, 1973*). Assessment technologies that value a "right" or "correct" standard over assessing the individual on their own terms continue to stifle individuals and communities that don't easily fit that standard. Utilizing Spolin's methods of assessment can help us move away from being mere gatekeepers of a standard and toward being facilitators of discovery.

The most traditional and doubtlessly the most familiar model of education for most educators is a "top-down" model of education where a teacher passes information down to students. The games Spolin advocates for encourage a more "bottom-up" approach in which students have

the agency to drive their own learning. As she writes in *Theater Games for The Classroom* "When evaluation is based on whether the problem (focus) was solved or not and no player is ridiculed, put down, or coyly manipulated, trust in fellow players grows. A peer group is formed and all are freed to take responsibility for their part of playing the game" (9). Improvisation takes trust to work, but so does a classroom. The games Spolin uses not only prepare individuals for the adaptability needed in and improvisational performance, but they also help individuals begin to trust one another through repeated practice. As the players become more familiar with each other and their side coach the approval/disapproval dynamic fades away. Instead, the assessment in an improvisational pedagogy is focused on whether the problem at hand was solved and how each individual contributed to that solution. In Spolin's own words "prescribed ways of behavior" are merely a "fallacy" and there is no "right way" of solving a problem (7). This mentality allows students to use their individual identities as an asset rather than appropriate their identity to that of the dominant discourse. The concern is no longer if the student solves the problem the "right" way or the way the answer key tells them to, but the concern of assessment becomes did the student solve the problem at all and how? Yes, this may take more work on the part of the instructor, and it will certainly require more self-reflection in students, but it will assess individuals actual learning and thinking much more accurately than any test score.

I can't write this section without pointing out that the authorities that are responsible for the approval/disapproval methods are white. As Asao Inoue poignantly and rhetorically asked in his 2019 CCCC's Chair address "Who has been allowed to name people, places, things, the processes of writing and revision, theories of rhetoric? Who has named your sky? Who has named your writing, my friends? Who has named your pedagogies? Who has named your ways of judging language, my colleagues of color?" (355). Assessment in the approval/disapproval model still largely rewards "rightness" and in academic writing rightness is whiteness. But this is why Spolin's work is needed in

the study of academic writing. She offers students a chance to use play to name their own worlds rather than using a monolithic standard of assessment which can only reproduce itself ad infinitum.

Assessing Together

Spolin's improvisational pedagogy resists typical assessment in many ways. The teacher is a side coach (as explained in detail in chapter 3) who plays with and facilitates play as students learn and not an arbiter of what constitutes proper knowledge. This attitude of facilitation and working with students carries over to Spolin's methods of assessment. In *Theater Games for The Classroom* Spolin uses the term evaluation in place of assessment and writes "Evaluation is nonjudgmental. It is not critical, but, like side coaching, grows out of the focus" (6). In this way she tells us that "Evaluation often tempts teacher and player alike to dispense their own opinions about the "right way" of doing something. Assume nothing; evaluate only what you have just seen" (7). She also importantly cautions "Be alerted as to when you are passing on a cultural experience instead of viewing an actual experience" (8). Here we can see that Spolin was acutely aware that approval/disapproval models of assessment only pass on the cultural standard of those that came before masquerading as the "right" or "correct" way. Instead, Spolin's improvisational pedagogy is focused on interaction using dialogical evaluation to help students discover without being given "right" answers from a teacher. This is because a voice long unheard is allowed to speak in Spolin's assessment; the students themselves.

In *Improvisation for Theater* Spolin is clear that "The teacher-director must become the audience together with the student-actors in the deepest sense of the word for Evaluation to be meaningful" (28). This is done when all parties involved try to remain as objective as possible in order to evaluate an individuals' performance in achieving the focus of a particular lesson, exercise or game. Objectivity is to be strived for because for Spolin "Evaluation that limits itself to a personal

prejudice is going nowhere" (26). Rather than evaluate an individual performance for quality, the performance should be evaluated on the basis of whether or not it the student stayed on focus and achieved what they had set out to. Though this type of evaluation may not come to any of us easily, it builds a level of trust that makes it easier and easier with repeated efforts. As Spolin writes "In time, mutual trust makes it possible for students to give themselves over to the evaluation. Able to keep a single purpose in mind, they no longer need to watch themselves, they become eager to know where the problem got away from them" (26-27). This kind of assessment relies on teachers, individual students and the collective of students working together just as an improvisational assessment does with players, side coach and audience. Doubtlessly, by now an improvisational assessment pedagogy has its clear relevance and use for helping students discover both individually and collectively. So, what could this kind of evaluation look like and how might we adapt it to our composition classrooms?

What's Your Score?

Spolin's improvisational pedagogy takes the idea of scoring individuals and flips it on its head. Instead of applying a score from an outside source (E.G. a teacher or side coach) Spolin asks each individual to play a game called "What's Your Score?" In *Theater Games for the Lone Actor* she describes the focus of this game as "on acting on a problem as it is taking place" (116). Simply put "In this game you score (tally) your personal emotions, mannerism, behavior, habits – without shame or guilt, without justification, without confession, and without intent to change or effort to get rid of the emotion or mannerism" (115). She also lists this game as one to help actors overcome feelings of self-pity because:

> Scoring gives you a direct experience. The game insists that you make your mark somehow. If you can't write a score down, hit the arm of a chair. A direct experience is necessary to

> help clear you from the hold of the past and it is a state of being beyond the power of your negative emotions. Scoring you own behavior and emotions is taking personal responsibility. (115)

To Spolin knowing your score is about being present in the moment and confronting oneself without judgement. Importantly, the student has an physical experience (scoring) that accompanies their mental experience so the bodymind can work as one. She wants students to move past their anxieties and into a space where they can truly discover as "In giving full attention to what is at hand, you are briefly free of the past and its opinions, attitudes, and positive/negative emotions" (117). This space is one of potential discovery. The authority of past approval/disapproval models does not matter in this space. Spolin encourages those keeping score to "Forget trying to reason or analyze. There's always a reason! No blame, no confession. Just score your own behavior and emotions, *right now*!" (117). Get out of your head and into the space as a side coach would say.

For Spolin this is a game that forces the student to be present in the moment and in so doing frees them of their past anxieties as they take autonomy over their own actions rather than be governed by fears from their past in the approval/disapproval model of education. "What's Your Score" in Spolin's pedagogy functions as a proto-praxis. It prepares one to dialogue with others by training the student to listen to themselves without judgement. In a conversation with longtime partner Kolmus she says of score that it "is the observance of what you do. You become part of your life as audience as well as player" (Talent). Once one can do this with themselves, it follows that they can better listen to the other. Your act is simply to tally, to keep score, to pay attention in the moment to your own actions and note them. There is no winner or loser in "What's Your Score?" as Spolin masterful puts it "In Score we are not interesting in reforming, but in transforming" (*December 31, 1971*). "What's Your Score?" merely asks that students to be aware of

what they are doing not for the sake of right or wrong but purely for the sake of being aware of what they are doing. This awareness is the potential space for changing what one is doing not for the interest of society or a teacher but in the interest of achieving what one has set out to achieve. In the case of an improvisational game, this means the individual must pay attention to their fellow performers and themselves carefully and take ownership and authority of things they notice and want to change during the game. In student writing this can take the form of the student and teacher together noticing some feature of writing and making a mark when they see it. The student can then tangibly see what it is they need to change in their writing and take the authority over their own writing to discover new ways to change these features.

Improvising A Ride on The Fourth Wave

In terms of assessment I suggest that we borrow from "What's Your Score?" in assessing our students in the composition classroom. I am not proposing we simply allow students to assess themselves but that we combine "What's Your Score?" with contract grading in order to give students autonomy over their own work and the freedom to discover what is most relevant to their own lives. Building off of Inoue and those before him, I have a scaffolding in place in terms of how I envision a Self-Scoring Contract working that I will trace out here and tie to both composition pedagogy theory and Spolin's improvisational pedagogy. Though this is just the beginning of a "Self-Scoring Contract" I feel that putting this idea out and allowing others to add or subtract from it is perfectly in keeping with the kind of attitude promoted by improvisational theater.

Jane Danielwicz and Peter Elbow were some of the first to pioneer the grading contract in their "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching" in order to make assessment "easier and fairer… Our immediate goal is to put more energy into figuring out which

activities most reliably produce learning, and less energy into figuring out a numerical grade for a piece of writing" (249). They describe their contract at length and I'll reproduce it here:

> "You are guaranteed a B if you:
>
> 1. attend class regularly- not missing more than a weeks worth of classes;
> 2. meet due dates and writing criteria for all major assignments;
> 3. participate in all in-class exercises and activities;
> 4. complete all informal, low-stakes writing assignments (e.g., journal writing or discussion-board writing);
> 5. give thoughtful peer feedback during class workshops and with your group on other collaborative tasks (e.g., sharing commenting on drafts, peer editing, online discussion boards);
> 6. sustain effort and investment on each draft of all papers;
> 7. make substantive revisions when the assignment is to or changing the thinking or organization- not just editing up;
> 8. copyedit all final revisions of main assignments until they conventions of edited, revised English;
> 9. attend conferences with the teacher to discuss drafts;
> 10. submit your midterm and final portfolio.
>
> Thus, you earn the grade of B entirely on the basis of what you do - conscientious effort and participation. The grade of B does not derive from my judgment about the quality of your writing. Grades higher than B, however, do rest on my judgment of writing quality. To earn higher grades you must produce writing - particularly for your final portfolio - that I judge to be of exceptionally high quality." (245-246).

On the surface this is admirable, but again these contracts run into problems when they fail to acknowledge the writer's individual identity and reify the teacher as authority paradigm. As I read through this initially, I was nodding my head until I got to the text at the bottom concerning grades higher than B. This clashes with Spolin's notion of avoiding approval/disapproval models of education. The judgement of student writing quality by an authority tuns the risk of sliding into authoritarian practices. To me, this seemed quite at odds with the notion of fairness. How are my students to raise their writing to what Elbow and Danielewicz admit is such a "fuzzy" standard (251)?

Above all, what concerned me was that Elbow and Danielewicz actively avoid the students' experiences outside of class writing:

> "Our approach would appear to be highly unpolitical ideologically unaware. For our goal is to create a classroom and students get to give as much time and attention as possible writing and not to politics and culture. Of course, political and cultural issues turn up in student writing, but our tendency is to focus on the writing, discussing its effectiveness relative to the political and cultural issues themselves (not that one can ever completely separate the two). We don't mask the large power differential between us and our students, but we're not inviting negotiations there. In general, we're side-stepping conflict - especially by not putting grades on papers at all, since grades are a prime source of conflict. In short, we seek to reduce struggle by trying to make life easier for us as teachers and writing more pleasurable for students" (248).

Sure, Elbow and Danielewicz intentions are good here, but their end result is dangerous as we move forward towards a fourth wave of assessment. The lived experience of the writer is completely ignored here and not just passively so but actively ignored. These experiences are where our students

acquire their complex, individual identities. How are writers going to see the value in their writing outside of our classrooms if we are actively telling them their experiences outside of our class don't have any relevance to their writing and that its better to avoid labor/conflict in favor of what is easier and more pleasurable? Aren't we indirectly (or perhaps even directly) telling them their identity as an author, a creator, a writer, a person doesn't matter compared to the White standard identity that they should seek to emulate? Doesn't this model of a contract just produce passive drones willing to choose the easy, happy way out instead of struggle through the experiences that eventually constitute deep learning and knowledge?

In *Labor-Based Grading Contracts Building Equity and Inclusion in The Compassionate Writing Classroom* Asao Inoue makes no qualms about it "Grading, because it requires a single, dominant standard, is a racist and White supremacist practice" (5). Here, Spolin would agree that any system based on the dominant standard is authoritarian, limiting and therefore to be avoided. In an improvisational pedagogy both students and the teacher are simultaneously the audience that observe and react to each other as they work toward the focus. A critical issue in Inoue's scholarship is how he has labored to find a solution to assessment that is "*trying not to be unfair*" (46). He begins with community-based grading and moves to hybrid contract grading before finally settling on labor-based contracts as his assessment technology. Along the way he summarizes the problems he had with community-based grading stating:

> It didn't address the power differential between my students and myself in our assessments of portfolios (mine was always going to hold more weight in those final discussions), nor did the system account well for the ways some White and Asian female students didn't seem to resist as much the negative assessments of their writing by others, as White male students generally did… (55)

In an effort to be more fair to more students Inoue tried hybrid grading contracts, but found that they are "determined by a teacher's judgment of the *habitus* that are embodied in students' languaging" which "amounts to hybrid contracts being subtly racist and White supremacist" (60). Here, Inoue defines habitus as "linguistic, bodily, and performative dispositions" (5). Basically, these contracts relied too much on teacher perceptions of student writing/goals and so could only serve to reify the existing White standard of writing. Without taking into account student concerns, the only way to receive an A grade in one of these contracts would be to reproduce the writing of the dominate power structure either implicitly or explicitly stated by the teacher and so I'm sure Spolin would add that these contracts are authoritarian in nature as well.

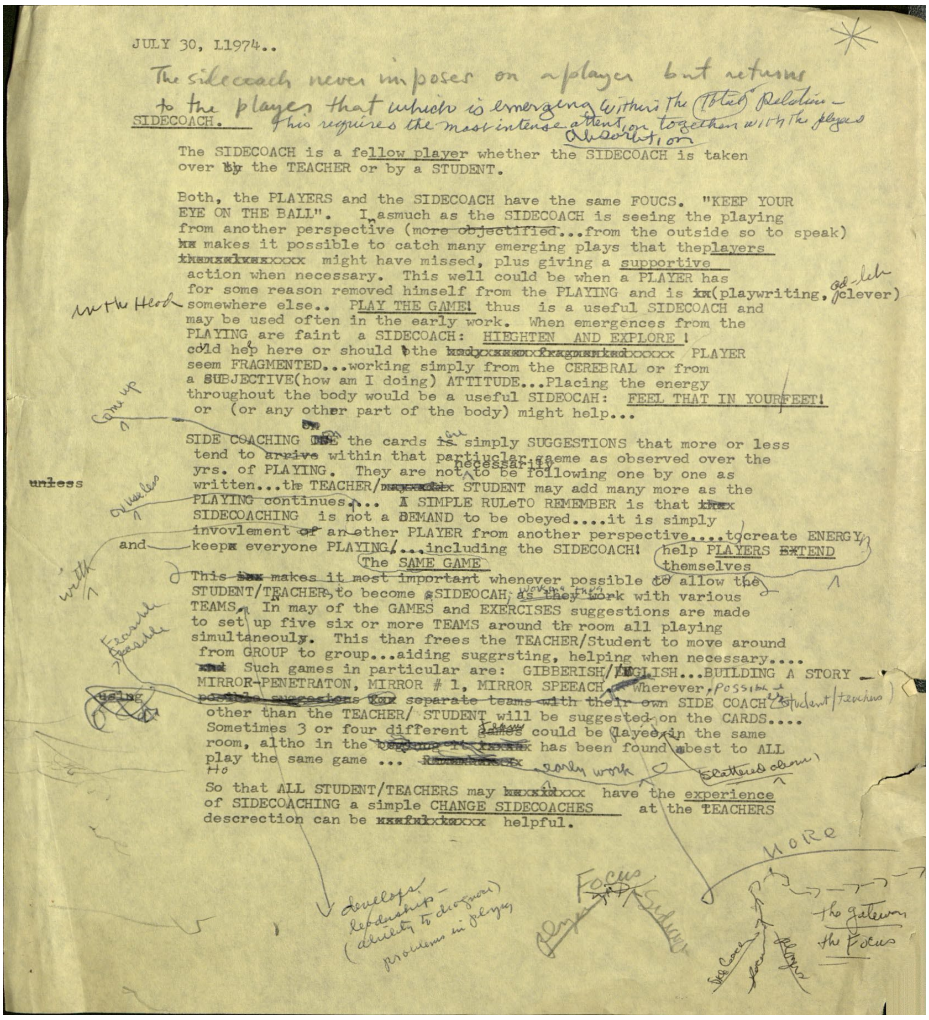
Still striving for the least unfair assessment technology, one not dependent on qualities determined by racist systems, Inoue adopted "labor-based contracts" which "used only judgments of quantity, not quality, to determine all course grades. The more work or labor a student does for the class, the higher their grade should be" (71). The idea of replacing quality judgements with quantity assessments directly addresses the limits of portfolio grading as now teachers' assessment of quality of the student's work is not the active factor determining their grade. Inoue's reasoning for this decision has crucial ties to Spolin's improvisational pedagogy:

> It struck me then and now that my students are entitled to give me whatever they want—or rather, whatever they can. And I'm equally entitled to tell them what I think of it and how it may not be helping them toward their goals in the course. They may be ready to listen or not, but their learning and labor should be their choice. I cannot coerce them into learning or enlightenment… This is how we all should be able to work with students, to labor together. (72)

I think there are several key confluences here between Spolin's pedagogy and what Inoue posits. Here, as in Elbow and Danielewicz's contract, conflict is avoided, but it is avoided in favor of collaboration through mutual labor and not for ease and pleasure sake.

Inoue notes that he is (or is not) helping students toward *their* goals which is a crucial step toward moving away from authoritarian systems. As Spolin notes in *Improvisation for Theater* "The student cannot always do what the teacher hopes, but as progress is made, capacities will enlarge. Work with students where they are, not where you think they should be" (10). Working toward student goals allows the student to take an active, autonomous role in their learning rather than have it imposed from on high. Second, Inoue is careful to note it is the amount of labor the student puts in that will reflect their learning and he cannot impose labor on them without also lapsing into authoritarianism. Here, I want to zero in on how Inoue defines labor. He writes "You can't learn without laboring. Labor requires a body in motion, even if the motions are small or slight. We speak through our bodies…Our brains also expend a lot of energy doing the work of thinking and processing" and even states plainly "to labor is to learn" (77-78). Thinking back to the idea of the bodymind from chapter 2 and how it functions in Spolin's pedagogy, we already know that the physical experience and mental experience of learning are inseparable and in fact thinking of the two together allows for a more robust notion of learning. Think back to the child throwing the ball at the wall over and over and eventually learning through repeated experience how the ball will react when it hits a certain spot or is thrown a certain way. The throwing of the ball here is the experience that teaches the child and this experience is, to me, interchangeable with Inoue's conception of labor. Here, labor is also Praxis as it is both action and reflection. The child is acting by throwing the ball and in refection on that action, that labor, that experience, the child discovers something new about their world. Finally, Inoue says that we must work *with* students and labor *together*. This again makes me think back to the way a side coach is involved in the playing the actors do in improvisational

games. In an interview Spolin states "A side coach like the players must learn to be in the process of playing… in the heart of the playing. If the side coach becomes the 'Teacher' or 'Director' and tries to get an end result without players in process he is worthless" (*Side coaching Interviews*).



JULY 30, 1974..

The sidecoach never imposes on a player but returns to the players that which is emerging within the (total) Relation-SIDECOACH. This requires the most intense attention together with the players

The SIDECOACH is a fellow player whether the SIDECOACH is taken over by the TEACHER or by a STUDENT.

Both, the PLAYERS and the SIDECOACH have the same FOUCS. "KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE BALL". Inasmuch as the SIDECOACH is seeing the playing from another perspective (more objectified...from the outside so to speak) makes it possible to catch many emerging plays that the players might have missed, plus giving a supportive action when necessary. This well could be when a PLAYER has for some reason removed himself from the PLAYING and is (playwriting, clever) somewhere else.. PLAY THE GAME! thus is a useful SIDECOACH and may be used often in the early work. When emergences from the PLAYING are faint a SIDECOACH: HIGHTEN AND EXPLORE ! could help here or should the PLAYER seem FRAGMENTED...working simply from the CEREBRAL or from a SUBJECTIVE(how am I doing) ATTITUDE...Placing the energy throughout the body would be a useful SIDEOCAH: FEEL THAT IN YOUR FEET! or (or any other part of the body) might help...

SIDE COACHING the cards simply SUGGESTIONS that more or less tend to arrive within that particular gaeme as observed over the yrs. of PLAYING. They are not to be following one by one as written...the TEACHER/ STUDENT may add many more as the PLAYING continues... A SIMPLE RULeTO REMEMBER is that SIDECOACHING is not a DEMAND to be obeyed....it is simply involvement of another PLAYER from another perspective....to create ENERGY and keep everyone PLAYING!...including the SIDECOACH! help PLAYERS EXTEND themselves

The SAME GAME

This makes it most important whenever possible to allow the STUDENT/TEACHER to become a SIDECOACH as they work with various TEAMS. In may of the GAMES and EXERCISES suggestions are made to set up five six or more TEAMS around the room all playing simultaneouly. This than frees the TEACHER/Student to move around from GROUP to group...aiding suggrsting, helping when necessary.... Such games in particular are: GIBBERISH/ENGLISH...BUILDING A STORY — MIRROR-PENETRATON, MIRROR # 1, MIRROR SPEEACH, Wherever possible suggestions for separate teams with their own SIDE COACH (student/teacher) other than the TEACHER/ STUDENT will be suggested on the CARDS.... Sometimes 3 or four different games could be played in the same room, altho in the has been found absest to ALL play the same game ...

So that ALL STUDENT/TEACHERS may have the experience of SIDECOACHING a simple CHANGE SIDECOACHES at the TEACHERS descrection can be helpful.

Spolin's notes and annotations on Side coaching reveal how she was constantly laboring on her own writing. (Spolin, *Side coaching Interviews*)

When a teacher works for their students (by telling them what they should learn and know) instead of with them (by facilitating what they need to know) then new discoveries cannot take place. Like Inoue, Spolin wants to labor with her students not for them or against them. Based in these three major confluences between the theory backing Inoue's labor-based contract and Spolin's

on evaluation techniques I have come up with a Self-Scoring Contract as a way to push forward towards a fourth wave of "more fair" assessment.

The Self-Scoring Contract

Borrowing from Spolin's "What's Your Score?" Inoue's, Danielewicz and Elbow's insights into assessment technologies, I propose what I'll call a "Self-Scoring Contract." My goal in creating this contract is the same as Inoue's in "trying not to be unfair." This contract would follow Inoue's labor-based contract in that quantity of work would be used to determine if the contract was being fulfilled satisfactorily, but the maximum grade receivable would be a B unless the student was able to meet a set of predetermined goals. The difference between these predetermined goals and those of previous incarnations of the grading contract being that the students would decide them for themselves. During the semester the student would be able to earn a B for putting in the highest level of labor operating much like the 10 stipulations Elbow and Danielewicz's contract features, but at the end of the semester I would allow students the chance to look over their previously submitted work with my feedback and play "What's Your Score?" Here, the student can use the feedback they have received on papers from me directly like the advice given by a side coach and looking cumulatively at that feedback combined with their daily in-class journal writing the student would score themselves and identify patterns they wanted to change in their writing. Together with their professor the student can then look over their own work and make decisions on what they want to change based in feedback and in what the student finds by taking their own score.

This contract would culminate in a final assignment in which the student first identifies their own goals and then revises major papers in order to meet those goals. If the student is able to meet their own goals through revision, then that student would receive an A grade for the course. Here, the quantity of labor the student produces, not its quality, makes up the majority of their grade. The

student and professor are able to collaborate on setting objectives for those that want to push beyond to an A grade. So, even in awarding an A, the professor is not passing down a grade from on high that simply reifies what has come before but rewarding that student's ability to find a need in themselves and strategize ways (with the teacher utilizing their expertise to facilitate) to best meet their own particular needs for the assignment in question and beyond.

In the Self-Scoring contract, no authority imposes goals or limits on the student. Utilizing the teacher's feedback as springboard the student can observe patterns in their own writing and take control over their work by deciding what goals they have and then laboring to meet them. While there is a quality judgment being imposed on the students' work that quality would be determined jointly through my feedback throughout the semester and the students' own goals. This approach still favors labor as the final revisions may be quite labor intensive, but a willing student would in effect teach themselves new writing techniques through these revisions. Thus, their own labor, their own experiences will be what drives students toward discovery and of course, earns them that all important A at the end of the semester.

Praxis

Above I acted. Here I'll reflect. As a white male race issues are not always easy for me to talk about. I can feel my own white fragility. Not to say these issues come easily to anyone. I realize I stand on the back of millions of people that have been colonized by those that share my skin and gender. In my own life I have taken so much from other cultures often without even realizing it. I love music and have played guitar for years and the first song I ever learned was a blues tune. I've listened to hip hop music since before I was old enough to understand the unseen force being fought against in many of the songs I love is systemic oppression put forth by people of my own skin color. I remember thinking school was easy as a kid and looking down on those that couldn't

keep up as slow or less than myself until I played soccer at the state cup level. There I was surrounded by kids that didn't speak English as a first language that had tales of struggles in school due to the language barrier. I saw my students cry after the 2016 election afraid of seeming regression of our culture. Experiences like these helped wake me up to the fact that while I was able to succeed in school or music or sports or wherever it was often at the cost of someone else's success. Beyond that, there are systems at work that continue to marginalize those that do not adhere to the standard of those in power. There is not reason I shouldn't be able to use my successes and the position they have brought me to find ways for more people to succeed.

Ultimately and unfortunately my answer to Inoue's question "Does your dominant, White set of linguistic habits of language kill people?" (367) is yes. If it doesn't right now, then it certainly has in the past. I acknowledge that I like many teachers that share my whiteness of skin and even more that share my interpellation into a racist ideology can improve and I truly believe improvisation can be a conduit through which differences can be meaningfully addressed by individuals and whole communities. In recognizing Viola Spolin's assessment technologies as valuable tools for use in the composition classroom I want to create an assessment culture in which all students are presented with the fairest possible opportunity to succeed in my classroom.

Crucially, when I say succeed, I don't even know what I mean by it. That may sound paradoxical, but to me, this is a necessary paradox. The moment I have decided what makes my students a success I have taken away their authority to discover. If I tell my students what success is then I simply perpetuate a racist, authoritarian system in which approval and disapproval of a white standard many of them have been dominated by decides their success. Instead, combining the powerful pedagogical work of scholars like Inoue with Viola Spolin's improvisational pedagogy has the potential to make assessment a tool for growth and discovery rather than oppression and

limitation. The discipline does move in waves and as such we find ourselves in a new wave of assessment in which humanity needs to be brought back in the way we assess our students in the humanities. If we can find ways to utilize the work of Viola Spolin as theory and practice in the composition classroom more and more we can continue to ride the wave into the fourth generation of assessment and do our best to make it the wave which is the most fair to the most students.

6: AN IMPROVISED LEGACY OF DISCOVERY

Coming into this work, I'll be honest, my focus was not on history. Perhaps that's because I always want to take action and be in motion and so history feels tired and static to me. Perhaps I was afraid of what I'd find out about myself by looking at what others had done before me. Perhaps I'm just impatient. But this work constantly reminded me of the value of a full history, one that can't fit in a history book, one with a story that isn't neat and linear, but instead scattered haphazardly among notes, letters, cassettes and photographs. It is cliché in this day and age to say history is written by the victors, but thinking about what that means in terms of my own work was a crucial point of fixation that moved me through some of the drier parts of my research. To me, victors always seemed to hint at some unseen hand shaping history behind the scenes, but that's not what I found in the archives. I found rejection letters from publishers that didn't understand the scope of Spolin's work. I found that a stroke had kept her from publishing the work that may have gone on to cement her legacy as an educator. I didn't find a "loser" that had been tossed aside, but in Spolin I found a champion of education whose victories simply hadn't been remembered. Sure, historical sexism may have played a role in that. Yes, the fact that she was in a humanities discipline such as theater may have hurt her chances with hard science types. But She hadn't been forced aside by some evil victorious group of rhetors though. She just hadn't been heard properly yet or by the right people. She was ahead of her time, but I think we in education broadly and composition specifically have finally caught up with her. Spolin had so much more to say than we as a discipline (or any single discipline for that matter), a community, as compositionists or rhetoricians or both had been exposed to and now it's time for us to listen to her.

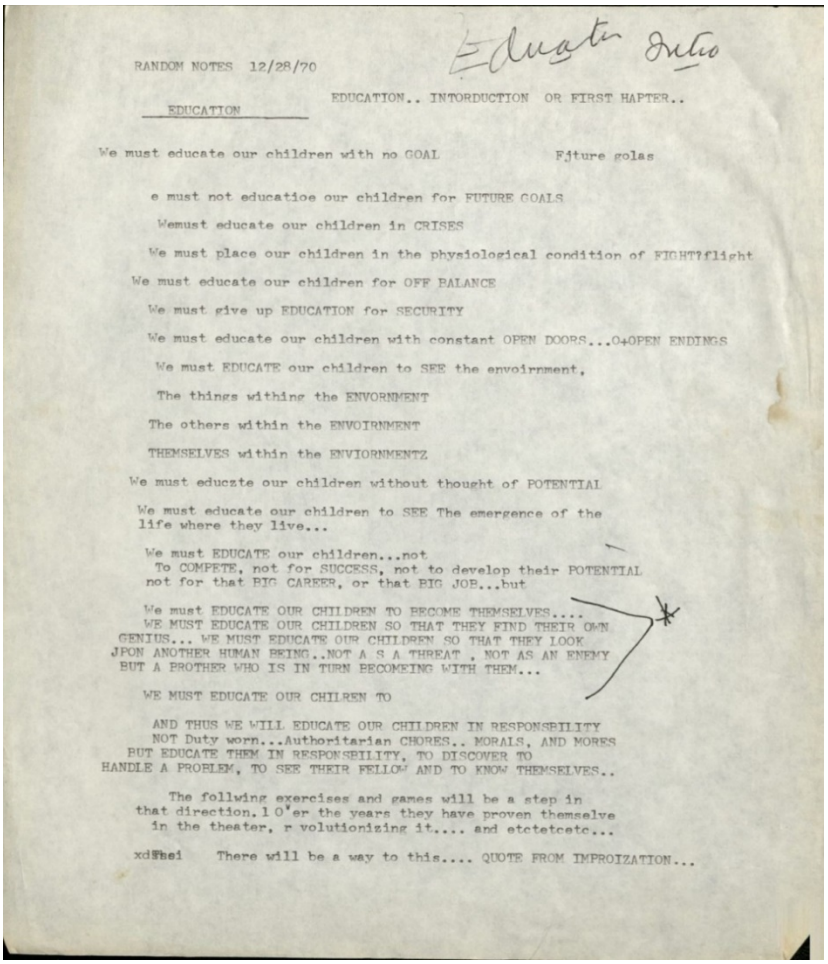
Part of Viola Spolin's legacy is already secure. She will undoubtedly be remembered by any actor practicing improvisation and likely just by most actors in general. This dissertation is not an

attempt to reshape or change that legacy but to illuminate an aspect of it that has been lost to history. Spolin was an educator first and foremost. She educated actors to begin with, but her focus was always broader than theater. Though she is now mostly remembered for the many outstanding and truly valuable contributions she made to that discipline, it is my hope that this dissertation has made the case that her theories and games have value to the more broad world of education generally and specifically, that they have much to offer us in composition. In the first chapter of this work I laid out the agenda for this study and made the case that Rhetoric and improvisation have been linked since long before Spolin. In this final chapter I want to take some of the materials that didn't really have a place in the three preceding chapters. It is my hope that this final section will be a sort of balance to chapter one. In chapter one I made the case that composition is linked to improvisation. Throughout this project I have tried to build on that link to establish Spolin's methods particularly as methods we may use in the composition classroom. Here, I want to use some of the interesting, but leftover pieces I found in the archive to make the case that Spolin herself saw her work as work that had value in education generally and not just in the theater specifically.

Should Have Said

Spolin always put education at the forefront of her work. Just look at the following early draft of the introduction to her Education manuscript on the next page. One thing this draft makes abundantly clear is that education in Spolin's terms is not simply for theater, but education is about the entirety of an individual's life in all its aspects. Crucially, she writes (in all caps) "Educate them in responsibility, to discover, to handle a problem, to see their fellow and know themselves" (*Education Handbook Part 1*).

Spolin sees improvisation as a teaching tool for all facets of the individual. Crucially, no authority rules of the education process.



RANDOM NOTES 12/28/70

Educate Intro

EDUCATION.. INTORDUCTION OR FIRST HAPTER..

EDUCATION

We must educate our children with no GOAL Fjture golas

e must not educatioe our children for FUTURE GOALS

Wemust educate our children in CRISES

We must place our children in the physiological condition of FIGHT?flight

We must educate our children for OFF BALANCE

We must give up EDUCATION for SECURITY

We must educate our children with constant OPEN DOORS...O+OPEN ENDINGS

We must EDUCATE our children to SEE the envoirnment,

The things withing the ENVORNMENT

The others within the ENVOIRNMENT

THEMSELVES within the ENVIORNMENTZ

We must educzte our children without thought of POTENTIAL

We must educate our children to SEE The emergence of the life where they live...

We must EDUCATE our children...not To COMPETE, not for SUCCESS, not to develop their POTENTIAL not for that BIG CAREER, or that BIG JOB...but

We must EDUCATE OUR CHILDREN TO BECOME THEMSELVES.... WE MUST EDUCATE OUR CHILDREN SO THAT THEY FIND THEIR OWN GENIUS... WE MUST EDUCATE OUR CHILDREN SO THAT THEY LOOK JPON ANOTHER HUMAN BEING..NOT A S A THREAT , NOT AS AN ENEMY BUT A BROTHER WHO IS IN TURN BECOMEING WITH THEM...

WE MUST EDUCATE OUR CHILREN TO

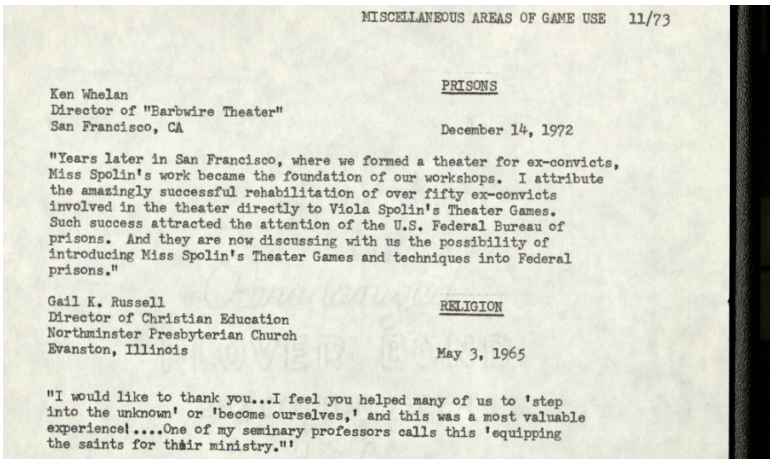
AND THUS WE WILL EDUCATE OUR CHILDREN IN RESPONSBILITY NOT Duty worn...Authoritarian CHORES.. MORALS, AND MORES BUT EDUCATE THEM IN RESPONSBILITY, TO DISCOVER TO HANDLE A PROBLEM, TO SEE THEIR FELLOW AND TO KNOW THEMSELVES..

The follwing exercises and games will be a step in that direction. l O'er the years they have proven themselve in the theater, r volutionizing it.... and etctetcetc...

xdThei There will be a way to this.... QUOTE FROM IMPROIZATION...

(Spolin, *Education Handbook Part 1*) Goal-oriented education was never Spolin's purview. She was always after constant growth and lifelong learning.

Spolin pushed her message beyond the walls of the school or the seats of the theater. She advocated for improvisation as a teaching tool in just about every conceivable scenario. She worked with prisons, churches, mental health institutions. I have reproduced a few of her collected reviews here:



MISCELLANEOUS AREAS OF GAME USE 11/73

PRISONS

Ken Whelan
Director of "Barbwire Theater"
San Francisco, CA

December 14, 1972

"Years later in San Francisco, where we formed a theater for ex-convicts, Miss Spolin's work became the foundation of our workshops. I attribute the amazingly successful rehabilitation of over fifty ex-convicts involved in the theater directly to Viola Spolin's Theater Games. Such success attracted the attention of the U.S. Federal Bureau of prisons. And they are now discussing with us the possibility of introducing Miss Spolin's Theater Games and techniques into Federal prisons."

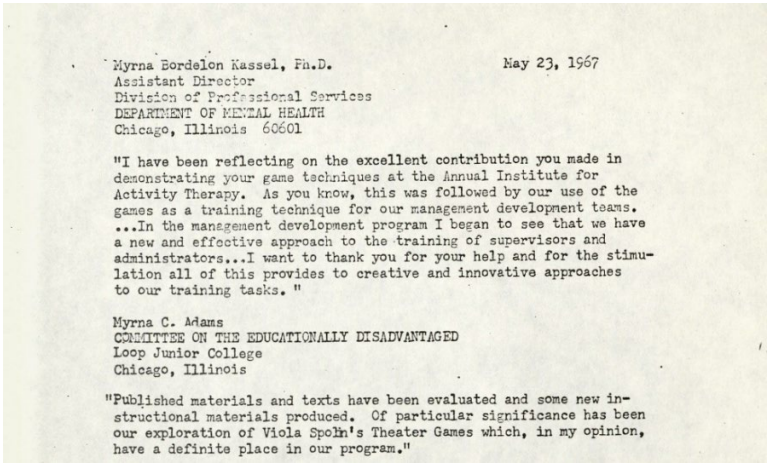
RELIGION

Gail K. Russell
Director of Christian Education
Northminster Presbyterian Church
Evanston, Illinois

May 3, 1965

"I would like to thank you...I feel you helped many of us to 'step into the unknown' or 'become ourselves,' and this was a most valuable experience!....One of my seminary professors calls this 'equipping the saints for their ministry."'

(Spolin, *Misc. Reviews.)*



Myrna Bordelon Kassel, Ph.D.
Assistant Director
Division of Professional Services
DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH
Chicago, Illinois 60601

May 23, 1967

"I have been reflecting on the excellent contribution you made in demonstrating your game techniques at the Annual Institute for Activity Therapy. As you know, this was followed by our use of the games as a training technique for our management development teams. ...In the management development program I began to see that we have a new and effective approach to the training of supervisors and administrators...I want to thank you for your help and for the stimulation all of this provides to creative and innovative approaches to our training tasks. "

Myrna C. Adams
COMMITTEE ON THE EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED
Loop Junior College
Chicago, Illinois

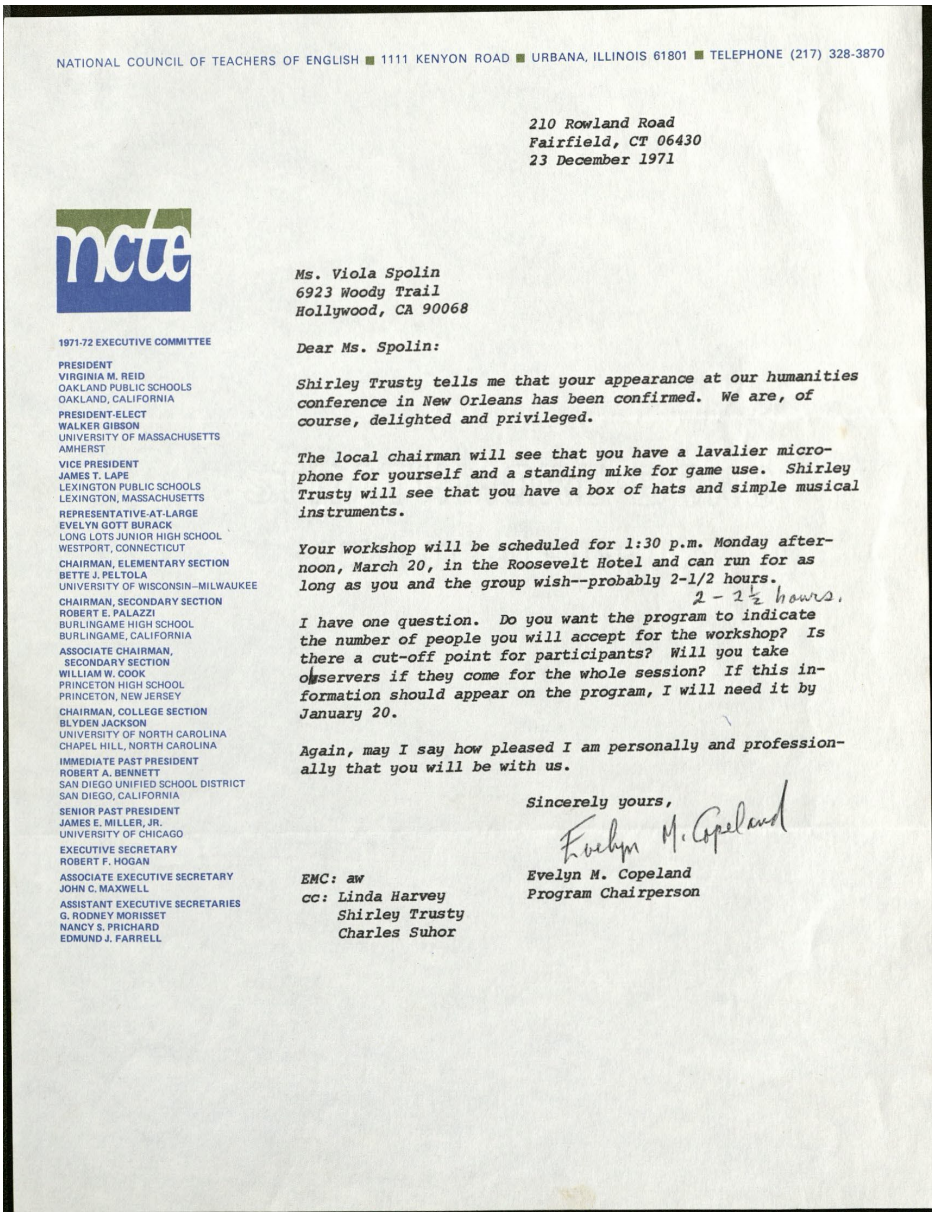
"Published materials and texts have been evaluated and some new instructional materials produced. Of particular significance has been our exploration of Viola Spolin's Theater Games which, in my opinion, have a definite place in our program."

(Spolin, *Misc. Reviews*)

Looking at these reviews demonstrates the wide range of disciplines in which Spolin's improvisational methods can be useful. To me, these documents are another clear illustration the Spolin was keenly aware that her methods were educational above all else and that though theater would be the discipline that would remember her most she always saw much broader potential for her work.

It is somewhat surprising that Spolin's methods aren't more well known when looking back at the folders of job offers in her collection. The two folders with over 25 pages of offers contains those from schools both pre- and post-secondary, mental health organizations, a nursing department and even a letter confirming her invitation to lead at workshop at the 1972 National Council of

Teachers of English conference. I have reproduced that letter on the following page which illustrates that she always intended her methods for use in education broadly and even specifically in the English classroom. Though this letter doesn't reveal anything about Spolin I didn't already know or haven't already conveyed, I just find it extremely interesting that she was right there on the cusp of being welcomed into English studies but perhaps because of her desire to push her methods to as many people as possible she just couldn't allow herself to be limited to one subject. I don't want to limit her either, but I do think we can look back at our own discipline's brief flirtation with Spolin as yet another argument for her inclusion in our canon of theorists.



NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH ■ 1111 KENYON ROAD ■ URBANA, ILLINOIS 61801 ■ TELEPHONE (217) 328-3870

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Ms. Viola Spolin
6923 Woody Trail
Hollywood, CA 90068

Dear Ms. Spolin:

Shirley Trusty tells me that your appearance at our humanities conference in New Orleans has been confirmed. We are, of course, delighted and privileged.

The local chairman will see that you have a lavalier microphone for yourself and a standing mike for game use. Shirley Trusty will see that you have a box of hats and simple musical instruments.

Your workshop will be scheduled for 1:30 p.m. Monday afternoon, March 20, in the Roosevelt Hotel and can run for as long as you and the group wish--probably 2-1/2 hours. 2 - 2½ hours.

I have one question. Do you want the program to indicate the number of people you will accept for the workshop? Is there a cut-off point for participants? Will you take observers if they come for the whole session? If this information should appear on the program, I will need it by January 20.

Again, may I say how pleased I am personally and professionally that you will be with us.

Sincerely yours,

Evelyn M. Copeland

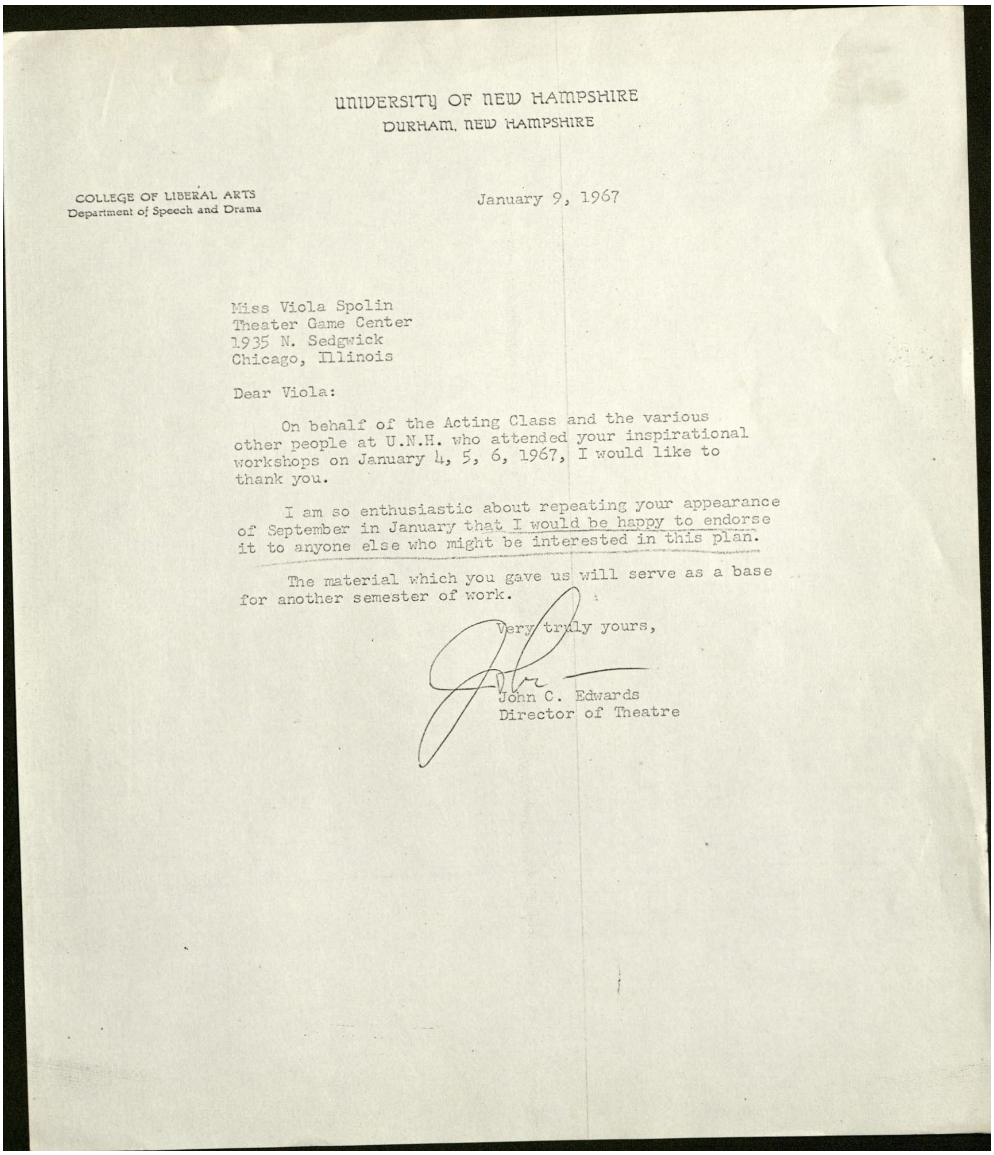
Evelyn M. Copeland
Program Chairperson

EMC: aw
cc: Linda Harvey
Shirley Trusty
Charles Suhor

(Spolin, *Job Offers 0001*)

The final interesting piece of evidence I want to display in making the case for that Spolin's methods not only belong in our rhetorical toolboxes but that she saw it that way comes from someplace close to home. I've been honored in the last five plus years to become a part of a tradition bigger than myself not only in academia generally, but in the halls of the University of New Hampshire specifically. I've inherited the tradition of Don Murray, Robert Connors, John Brereton, Cindy Gannett, Tom Newkirk, Kate Tirrabassi, Maya Wilson, and Bruce Ballenger not to mention

the people I have gotten to work personally with. I am proud to say that (at least tangentially) Viola Spolin is part of that tradition too. While she wasn't at UNH to talk specifically to the composition department (most likely because it had not yet been established) Spolin did lead a workshop at UNH in the 1970's. I have produced the letter she received afterward on the next page. Acting Theater Director John Edwards didn't mince words telling Spolin how much her workshop had meant to the program saying "I am enthusiastic about repeating your appearance" and even going so far as to proselytize the value of improvisation himself writing "I would be happy to endorse it to anyone else who might be interested in this plan" (*UNH Letter*). The letter was only written a few days after the workshops in question so Edwards was clearly in a hurry to book what he likely saw as someone that would soon be in high demand.



UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE
DURHAM, NEW HAMPSHIRE

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS
Department of Speech and Drama

January 9, 1967

Miss Viola Spolin
Theater Game Center
1935 N. Sedgwick
Chicago, Illinois

Dear Viola:

On behalf of the Acting Class and the various other people at U.N.H. who attended your inspirational workshops on January 4, 5, 6, 1967, I would like to thank you.

I am so enthusiastic about repeating your appearance of September in January that I would be happy to endorse it to anyone else who might be interested in this plan.

The material which you gave us will serve as a base for another semester of work.

Very truly yours,

John C. Edwards
Director of Theatre

(Spolin, *UNH Letter*)

Yes And…

Going forward my aim is to take the work in this dissertation as a theoretical foundation and create a book of Spolin's games adapted specifically to the composition classroom. My hope is to publish this work and show how multifaceted Viola Spolin was as a theorist whose methods have much to give composition in both theory and practice. I set out on this work with the intent of thinking about how we in composition might better deal with unexpected moments in our classroom so as to model the learning experience best for our students. My work took me to

Chicago where I touched the same notes books and breathed the same air as Viola Spolin, the legendary mother of improvisational theater. My work revealed Spolin was so much more than a kindred spirit though. Spolin was and is a pioneer in the world of education. Her work was radical for its time and is still radical today even though at its core it may seem simple. Listening to those around you and utilizing their experiences together with yours can open new worlds and push tradition forward until it becomes discovery. Spolin's games teach that through practice. Spolin's theories reaffirm those value over and over again. I didn't just find a kindred spirit in Viola Spolin. I didn't just find my own personal educational role model either. I found a genius whose ideas needed to be shared. I found an educator that had answers to so many of the questions we ask in composition classrooms, journal, conferences and around the English department. That is why I want to show as many as I can Spolin and her improvisational methods so that we may utilize them in our own pedagogies.

Epilogue

Composition and rhetoric have been intertwined with improvisation since Quintillian and even before. Improvisation's games can help students listen and collaborate in class as they work towards discoveries that resonate with their lives outside of the classroom. Adhering to the focus of the games trains students to listen actively and rhetorically to one another and build of their own experiences and those of others to discover rather than passively memorize what has been done before. As students learn to listen to each other's language and body language without judgement or without competition but with their only purpose to find a way to stay on the focus of the game to complete it in their own way they leave behind authoritarian ideas of right and wrong. In this improvisational model, students will think critically about the complexities of individual identity and the larger ideologies that shape their worlds.

As teachers we too can adapt the model of education put forth by improvisation to become more like side coaches committed to utilizing our expertise to facilitate a descriptive approach that allows our students to experience discovery instead of an authoritarian, prescriptive model that simply reifies itself. By playing and experiencing with our students as side coaches do we as teachers give students the necessary aid so that they may make their own discoveries by maintaining a descriptive stance instead of a prescriptive one. We can meet students where they are in this way and help set them up with the potential energy needed to discover. In so doing we can use the tools of an improvisational pedagogy to forge an improvisational pedagogy that takes the best aspects of critical pedagogy and process theory and uses games as the vehicle through which students come to view education as a constantly evolving, individually empowering group activity.

Borrowing from the improvisational assessment pedagogy of Viola Spolin, particularly her notion of self-scoring in "What's Your Score?" we as teachers can move toward a fourth-wave of assessment safe in the knowledge that we are answering the call to find new, more fair ways of assessing all students. We can continue to do the work necessary to ensure all of our students feel as though their own complex, individual identity is valid, and their experiences matter in and out of the classroom. Viola Spolin herself fought to bring her revolutionary ideas about education until a stroke left her physically unable to do so. For me these theories are still alive and well and unlike the static view of history I came to this project with, I finish it invigorated to continue the mission Spolin started. History only becomes static when we let it. Viola Spolin's story is not over at all. As far as composition is concerned, Viola Spolin's story has just begun.

And Scene.

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